

**Shobhaa**

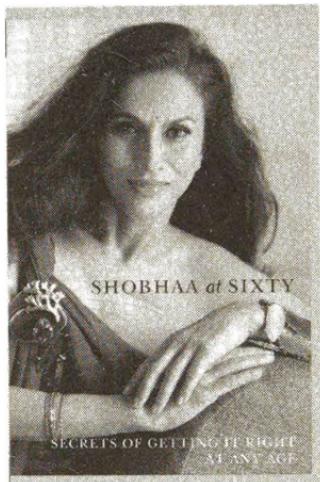
**Never a Dull Dé ...**





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## SHOBHAA at SIXTY Secrets of Getting it Right at Any Age

Shobhaa Dé has always lived by her own rules, and in this startlingly candid look at her life spanning six decades, she shares some of her most intimate secrets - from beauty tips, dealing with anxiety and ageing to spiritual quests, and seeking solace and tranquility. She comes up with a potent elixir to rejuvenate life, giving wise, honest and practical advice on how to cope with the myriad challenges today's stressful times throw at you - whether you are twenty, thirty or seventy.

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Lord Ganesha ... in gratitude.

And, my husband Dilip ... for helping me navigate  
through life without hurting myself.



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My most amazing, 30-year-old bond with the Mathew family is sealed with dry Kerala beef! Let me just say, it's a family recipe the lady of the house should go public with! I love and respect my long standing association with the Malayalam Manorama Group. 'The Sexes' has given me an enviable reach and a credible platform for the past three decades. I value our relationship and I hope I continue to stay in their good books ... for the dry beef, and much else!

TRG is possibly one of India's most erudite and respected editors. Most importantly, he is my buddy. I thank him for his affection over the years. The column was started (and continues) largely because of his sweet words of praise.

Ashok Chopra ... what can I say about this man with twinkling eyes and a scary sense of observation? His quiet strength and determination, his innate confidence and resolve to publish books he believes in ... all these lovely qualities have provided much needed nurturing to countless authors. I owe him a big one - as his author, and an even bigger one - as his friend.



## MY THOUGHTS

*P*rolific is a loaded word. I am wary of it. I never know how to react when someone comes up to me and announces chattily, ‘My goodness! You are so prolific!’ Is the person paying me a genuine compliment? Being sarcastic? Stating the obvious? Or subtly criticizing me? Writers are thin skinned creatures. They are always looking for hidden meanings in the most innocuous of comments. They forget that the rest of the world may not be as obsessed with words. Their own or anybody else’s. Words are powerful and lethal. They leave permanent footprints. Words have an impact on readers that writers cannot control or manipulate. That’s terrifying! Prolific sounds safe. Sounds good. It shows the other person’s interest in the written word. And perhaps in YOUR written word. And I realize I should stop being silly. Stop being touchy. And just say, ‘Thank you ... yes, you could say I am prolific.’ Such a response would end the conversation right there. But do I say that? Nope. I look injured. And I foolishly ask, ‘But ... but ... what do you mean by that comment?’ Oops. Wrong move. Dangerous question. It’s too late by then. The person takes a deep breath and launches into a speech. I am asked exactly how many columns I write per week. Is it tough to keep those deadly deadlines? Have I ever missed one? Is it boring to hammer out so much stuff? Forty-five years of writing?? No wayyyy! Cool. Don’t I write every single day, no matter

what? Where does the inspiration comes from? Have I ever suffered from a writer's block? Is it really true that I write 2500 words on a daily basis? When do I find the time to write? These questions annoy me. But only mildly. Are surgeons asked, 'Do you operate every single day? How many surgeries? What if you aren't in the mood to operate? Have you ever encountered surgeon's block, thrown down your scalpel and walked out of the operation theatre?' No. Right? Why not? Because a surgeon's job is to save lives. Guess what? In a way, so is a writer's.

The columns in this volume reflect several concerns ... my own and society's at large. Some of the writing is acerbic and sharp, but almost all of it is impassioned and deeply personal. When I started writing '*The Sexes*' back in the early 1990s the idea was to talk about issues that defined the rapidly changing gender equations between men and women in India. For the first time since Independence, India was in the throes of dealing with fluid and baffling attitudes towards sex and sexual mores. The changes we were living through were so dramatic and radical they had to be squarely addressed sans moralistic judgments. I believed my job as a columnist was to reflect these changes and comment on the new contours of man-woman relationships. What started off as a jaunty fortnightly column in one of India's best read weeklies (*The Week*), soon acquired a loyal following (thank you, readers, you are my oxygen, nutrition, daily work out and indulgent treat), and once that precious relationship gets established as strongly, it becomes an addiction. Today, I cannot do without my daily fix of words - I mainline on them. Take away all else from me if you must, Oh Lord! I pray ... but leave those precious words!

Shobhaa Dé  
Mumbai, 2013

*One*

# MOVIES, MIRCH, MASALA

## *HIMBETTES!!*

©ll hail the arrival of the Himbette. Huh?

It's the male bimbette, in case you are wondering ... and the creature is right here, in our backyard. A few years back Bollywood gave birth to this special species in style, with the launch of a towel-dropping debutant (Ranbir Kapoor in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Saawariya*), and a six-pack flaunting middle-aged superstar (Shah Rukh Khan in Farah Khan's *Om Shanti Om*). The war of the male sex symbols was taken to the next level with the publicity machines on both sides going into overdrive about ... what else? The over-exposure. Ranbir's butt was pitted against SRK's abs ... and audiences were overjoyed as the drool metre registered wild swings.

Men in Hollywood have flexed their biceps for decades. Good old Arnie (Arnold Schwarzenegger), also a former grinning governor of California, was quite the pin-up boy in his time, as was beefcake Sylvester Stallone. There was Tarzan and his leather loin cloth, followed by a buck naked Brad Pitt as Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004). But even Hollywood stopped short of blatantly publicizing films by exploiting the heroes' physical attributes at each and every stage.

The two Bollywood dhamakas, on the other hand, went all out to promote various body parts of the males in the

movie, in a manner that is really in your face. Strangely enough, even the stars went along with the sexist promos that dissected their anatomy in intimate detail. SRK gave countless interviews about his six-pack - how, where and why he acquired the taut mass of muscle, while Ranbir coyly simpered through several interviews revolving around his derriere! Wow! You've come a long way, baby. What an amazing reversal of roles ... and perfect timing, too!

Weren't we sick of reading about Mallika Sherawat's ample assets, or Raakhi Sawant's belly button? Isn't India completely familiar with Malaika Arora Khan's cute bum and Bipasha Basu's heaving bosom? The girls have been brazening it out for years. Women in showbiz are no strangers to the maxim: 'The more you show, the more the biz'. It needed a Raakhi Sawant to put the whole debate into perfect perspective when she stated boldly on a television show: '*Jo dikhta hai, woh bikta hai.*' ('What shows, is what sells'). Well, the lads in moviedom must have taken a tip or two from the item girl and decided to turn into item boys themselves! Why not?

Shekhar Suman has been proudly flashing his 'heavage' (male cleavage), ever since he acquired one. Salman Khan has been shirtless for years. In the era of gender equality, it's about time men got commodified and 'sold', just like women who have been packaged and hawked in the marketplace for centuries.

I don't know whether Farah Khan - who got SRK to strip - was aware of the signal she'd be sending out. I also don't know whether Sanjay Leela Bhansali (definitely a director in touch with his female self), consciously structured the 'butt revealing' moment (hacked, alas, by cruel censors) in order to make a point, but the audiences did take to the new 'all revealing' approach most enthusiastically. To a small extent this show of narcissism started a new trend in Bollywood.

Copycat film makers tried to add a couple of risqué shots of men flashing well-toned buns (Kevin Costner rules in this department), which may be a good thing.

Most of our ageing heroes with saggy behinds and bloated paunches will necessarily have to shape up. Or maybe lazy filmmakers will continue to stick to the boring old formula of placing a buxom heroine under a cascading waterfall, clad in nothing more modest than a clingy, white saree? Either way, audiences will no longer have to endure the sight of unshapely bods (male or female) prancing around trees. Men and women in the movies have raised the benchmark and are setting impossibly high standards for their fans to emulate. Given the choice between ogling SRK's bared body getting an erotic drenching via a fire hose (come on, Farah, how obvious can you get?), or waiting for Ranbir's precariously tied towel to drop and watching Mallika/Bipasha/Sushmita(Sen) baring their enhanced assets, we know who'll win our jaded vote. Michelangelo's David or da Vinci's Mona Lisa?

Let's get a sms poll going on that one. Right here, right now!

## 'OMG! BOLLYWOOD TYPES HAVE BRAINS!'

 I swear this is true. God promise!

There we were - arty, self-conscious intellectuals from Dilli, and the blingy Mumbai variety (errrr ... moi?) attending a three day lit fest evocatively called 'Mountain Echoes' in the Kingdom of Bhutan. The Delhi contingent was uniformly attired in charcoal grey, black, brown and maroon. Strictly no brights. Accessories were limited to heirloom shawls and chunky Tibetan silver. Sensible shoes, sensible expressions, sensible talk. Everybody behaving and being ultra 'literary'.

Mumbai was represented by yours truly plus three Bollywood guys - Madhavan ('Maddy'), Imtiaz Ali and Rohan Sippy (not maro-ing dum, let me add) and one female actor, Tisca Chopra. Of course, there was much anticipation, but more than that, there was skepticism. What do these Bollywood-wallas know about such lofty events, where great minds congregate and offer food-for-thought to the less brainy? Bollywood is for entertainment of the non-cerebral kind - I mean, if movies like Abhinav Kashyap's *Dabangg* start winning national awards, we know we are in trouble! Get the drift, right?

Well, Rohan and his low-key wife pretty much kept to themselves, perhaps preferring the fresh mountain air to the snooky airs of the motley lit-crew, while Madhavan came in two days later. It didn't help when he showed up at the

dashing Indian major general's formal dinner dressed like he was attending a rock concert. I ran into him in the lobby of the hotel and joked: 'They aren't going to let you in clad in that studded shirt!' Maddy shrugged, grinned and said cheekily: 'Oh, I am a hero. I'm allowed to dress like this!' Sure enough, when he arrived at Major General V.K. Pillai's sprawling residence, he was the one who stole the show and was mobbed by fawning guests. The Delhi contingent looked on in horror. Everything about Maddy was all wrong that night. They tch-tched.

Yeah, sure. But nobody at that wonderful, 'fauji' reception was bothered. All they cared about was that one of the '3 Idiots' was in their midst and 'Manu' (minus Tanu!) himself was charm personified. He posed for countless pictures, signed autographs, shook hands, smiled and seemed to genuinely enjoy himself. Ditto, when he turned up at the venue of the lit fest the next morning, ready for his session on script writing with Rohan Sippy (which I moderated). Both the men had done their homework thoroughly and come well prepared. It turned out to be one of the liveliest sessions of the festival, thanks to the quick wit, knowledge and passion expressed by these guys.

It was the reactions to their presentation that tickled me. An erudite journo from the capital walked up to me and exclaimed incredulously: 'I say, that Madhavan, he is really, very bright! So is Sippy!' The tone was one of utter astonishment and disbelief. It was a definite 'Did you know fish can fly?' moment. I was amused, but also slightly annoyed. Come on, you chaps. What did you think? That Bollywood is full of dumbos? Real life 'Idiots'? What's with the superciliousness and condescension? I finally got it: more than the content of what both men delivered during their presentation, it was their fluency, diction and the complete ease that caused shock and awe.

The 'new', 'improved' Bollywood is like that, my friends. These men are representative of this brave breed. Get over it! They are aware, smart, well-read and tech-savvy. They could've become successful bankers or crack corporate honchos, if they'd so desired. But they made an informed choice - and that choice is a career in cinema. If they are successful, it is because they are competent and clever. They know the nuts and bolts of making movies - too bad if those movies aren't pretentious and boring. I didn't like Rohan Sippy's *Dum Maro Dum* myself. So what? Sippy made a commercial film that did appeal to a certain segment of the audience. That's his prerogative as a film maker. Unlike other less sophisticated (and far less talented) brats in the film industry, Sippy didn't take to childish name calling. Ditto for Maddy, who also had the right amount of throwaway confidence when quizzed about his girth. He shrugged and said wryly: 'Here's an overweight, married Tamilian with a kid, who comes from Jamshedpur and makes it in Bollywood. Frankly, I'm not complaining!'

There is a major learning curve ahead for all those twits who think it's cool to look down on what they witheringly refer to as 'Bollywood types'. There's news for you guys. And that news is these 'types' are bloody smart and bloody successful. They know their onions and are making waves not just in India but internationally. This lot really doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks of them. So long as their movies rock and they make money, they are totally cool. That's more than can be said about some of those losers looking down their noses and chirping stupidly: 'Oh My God! Bollywood people have brains!' Oh yes, they do!

B\*\*\*'s too, if you must know! Take that and smoke it!

## BOLLYWOOD FRIENDSHIPS

*B*ollywood dosti is as temporary as the froth on a cappuccino.

It's best to accept this premise and insulate yourself against future disillusionment. Nobody's fault. The nature of this fast moving and fickle business is such. One only has to look back at some of the greats who ruled to understand that's the way the cookie crumbles. There are three professions in India that come with built-in, sell-by dates for friendship - movies, politics, cricket. All three are ruled by money. Big money. And insecurity. Big insecurity.

Friendships, such as they exist in these three worlds (that have an increasing number of overlapping personalities dabbling in all of them), are necessarily need-based and therefore, fragile. Remember those ads - 'Hair Today. Gone Tomorrow'? Something similar happens in Bollywood - literally and metaphorically. Most stars take it for granted that their latest BFFs are going to be hanging around only so long as the going is good. Stripped of any fancy illusions, stars move on. If there are private disappointments, they are rarely aired ('Boss, I may need the person at some point. Why reveal the cards at this stage?'). Pride and much else is swallowed, as both parties disconnect and provide politically correct quotes (carefully crafted by professional minders) to the media that state nothing whatsoever is wrong in the equation. Nobody is fooled. But does anybody really care?

The surprising answer is 'Yes'. There are a few foolish people even in such a cut-throat business, who are shattered when they get discarded, often overnight and without any explanations. Every now and then, I run into a few star journalists from another zamana who can't get over the insults and hurts heaped on them by the very people who once fell over backwards to court them. All this came sharply into focus at the somber remembrance service for ace photographer Gautam Rajadhyaksha, held by his genuine friends on what would have been his 61<sup>st</sup> birthday. That this fell just three days after his untimely death, made it even more poignant. His faithful caretakers advised some of us not to bring flowers since the house would overflow with bouquets in any case, as it always happened. It was feared we'd run out of space and vases for the flowers!

As it turned out, perhaps two impersonal bouquets got delivered - the sort Bandra florists send out routinely from a master list. No signature, but a hastily scribbled 'Happy Birthday' in bold red letters! How ironical! Wishing a dead man 'Happy Birthday'.

There were less than twenty people present. Mainly distant family members and ex-colleagues. All those 'friends' who once flocked to his home for the informal open house he traditionally hosted, had clearly found other pressing engagements! Gautam would have laughed the travesty away, pumped up the volume of the Maria Callas CD, asked his man Friday Mangesh for more red wine, flung one of his exquisite shawls over his shoulder and exclaimed exuberantly: 'Darling ... just forget it!'

Gautam was more realistic than some other journos, who sank into depression and refused to acknowledge the hard realities of showbiz. There is just one rule here, and it is exclusively for winners. There is no place for losers in this

town. No matter who you WERE! It is who you ARE that counts. Just that. If your use is over, you are dead meat.

Most actresses past their prime understand this harsh truth and deal with it the best they can. Others become ghost-like and reclusive. Still others relocate ... marry ... divorce ... idiotically attempt a 'come back'. There is no such thing as a second chance in showbiz. Smart actors pick up on that. Once you are over, boy! Are you over! When one mentions Rajesh 'The Phenomenon' Khanna to today's generation, most expressions are totally blank! Had poor Manoj Kumar not been cruelly mocked in contemporary films, it would have been no surprise to discover 'Mr. Bharat's' name didn't register either. Their female contemporaries are long forgotten, some are dead and gone. Occasionally, one sees a shadow of their former selves in nostalgic television programmes that rely on the audiences' total recall. Some have stayed friends through these dark, neglected years. Others are reconciled to their collective fates and have made an uneasy peace with oblivion, neglect, penury and abuse.

Moral of the story? Save yourself. Do not look for friendship with movie stars. It is not that actors are mean and cruel (well, some are). They just don't have the bandwidth to accommodate anybody not in a position to push their careers forward. Careers which are short lived and desperate, to begin with. If Juhi Chawla opened up about her feelings regarding Shah Rukh Khan and how she expected him to stand by her comatose brother Bobby, who was once SRK's business associate and 'friend', it is a brave and unusual admission. Most stars prefer to shut up and put up when it comes to soured friendships. Who remembers the froth once the cappuccino is gulped down? Friendship in Bollywood is exactly like that. Kyunki har ek friend zaroori hota hai.

Enjoy when 'Hot'!

## CURVE IT LIKE KOENA ...

Bollywood Botox babies, beware - your days may be numbered!

Hollywood executives have declared an all-out war against enhanced physical assets. In other words, silicone sex bombs are in trouble.

It all started with a 23-year-old aspiring starlet called Heidi Montag who underwent ten cosmetic procedures in one day, including liposuction and Botox, in order to bag movie roles. While the ambitious young woman has zero regrets and insists she has started receiving serious attention ever since she got her body surgically fixed up, there are influential casting directors at Fox Broadcasting who have decided to take a stand on this issue.

Plastic boob jobs will have to be declared while showing up for an audition. Worse, some agents are getting still more specific - only women with real breasts need apply. The reason for this dramatic turnaround in a business that relies heavily on the size of a woman's mammary glands is because plastic breasts don't 'emote' as effectively as real ones. They are far too rigid and stiff, when a director requires movement, mobility and heavy duty heaving! This debate extends beyond breasts. Older women in showbiz have also been advised to ease up on the Botox shots and lip fillers since both procedures 'freeze' expressions (Ravi Shastri *vs.*

Harsha Bhogle). If this trend travels to our shores, a lot of careers will be in serious trouble!

Look at poor Koena Mitra. She went public with her disastrous ‘jobs’. Today, whenever she appears on television, she scares viewers. If this is what cosmetic surgery does to people, spare yourself and others. Koena’s immobilized face, to say nothing of her ‘fixed assets’ is a terrifying reminder of what naked ambition forces some actors to do. There are several others in the top rung, who are more discreet, or have better surgeons working on them.

Raakhi Sawant was one of the few who was brutally honest about her breast implants, confessing candidly that she looked at the procedure as a necessary investment: ‘What God doesn’t give you, a surgeon can!’ she boldly declared, before removing the blessed implants for a reality dance show. Today, her taut facial skin gives nothing away, since nothing moves - we can’t tell whether she is delighted, depressed or plain bored. Her eyes remain glazed behind an impressive wardrobe of coloured lenses, and as for her hair - when was the last time anybody saw whether or not she has any left?

Those wigs sure come in handy, and Raakhi’s are wonderfully customized. As are Amitabh Bachchan’s countless, superbly designed toupees. While Salman Khan’s hair transplants have helped him to cavort with co-stars half his age, other Bollywood heroes have not been as lucky, despite new hair, new teeth, laser eyes, face lifts and heaven knows which other lifts.

If ‘real’ becomes in - a lot of glam careers worldwide will nose dive. Frankly, showbiz is about looking amazing at all times. That is what the world pays for. Illusion and fantasy keep audiences glued, as hungry eyes feed on unbelievable beauty. Most viewers are not bothered about finer details. If Heidi can cash in on her brand new features, and the

nips/tucks make her look good, feel good, isn't it her business?

Jane Fonda too went under the knife to prepare for a Broadway role - her before-and-after pictures were startling, to say the least. She should post her surgeon's contact details on the internet. There are men and women in America willing to have their surgeries documented for television programmes. In 2009, ten million cosmetic procedures were performed in America alone. In India, this is one of the fastest growing segments with medical tourists pouring in to take advantage of our surgical expertise and the comparatively low costs (though, how low is low? According to press reports, Sunanda Pushkar's doc says she owes him between three to four lakh rupees for a nose job performed ten years ago. That isn't exactly small change).

Natural is the way to be. Natural is cool. Oh God ... this is just so scary. I can see so many Bollywood bimbettes scurrying for cover.

Silicone Valley will have to reinvent itself!

## SHE DARES ... WHO BARES ...

*R*elax! She's done it. We've seen everything. And nobody has died of shock.

The hot news about a certain starlet appearing on the cover of *Playboy* caused a minor flutter across assorted platforms in India. But that was it. After the initial and obligatory murmurs of protest - the usual nonsense about 'How could a Bharatiya nari do such a thing and bring disgrace to India?' - people promptly and sensibly switched their attention to someone else, something else.

Meanwhile, Sherlyn Chopra, the starlet who bared it all, slipped back into Mumbai quietly, and fully clothed, much to the disappointment of waiting shutterbugs. There was no rioting on the streets, and nobody hurled abuses or tomatoes on Sherlyn. This is today's woman, exercising an option and grabbing an opportunity. She stripped because she wanted to, not because someone was holding a gun to her head. Perhaps, Sherlyn also hoped to make some sort of dodgy history by being the first desi girl to bare it all for what was once the world's premiere pin-up publication. But let's get a little perspective here.

*Playboy*, like Hugh Hefner, its geriatric founder, is a dying brand. Nobody pays good money any more to ogle naked ladies in lavish centrespreads, no matter how buxom. Why should they when one can feast one's eyes on still more sizzling images for free on the internet! If Sherlyn has been

singled out for this dubious ‘honour’, chances are *Playboy* is trying its level best to crack the potentially huge, and very lucrative, Indian market.

However, what the marketing whiz kids at *Playboy* probably don’t know is that the Indian reader has come a long way. And we have had our own versions of *Playboy* floating around for decades. Even those didn’t take off! Even if some of the centre spreads, who took it all off for them, did. Indian men obviously didn’t get their jollies from staring at air-brushed images of busty blondes with ceramic teeth and fixed up faces back then. It’s doubtful whether that tired old formula will work now. This is an era in which an ‘official’ porn star like Sunny Leone has gone mainstream without anybody suffering a cardiac arrest. Open any movie magazine and you will see eye candy like you won’t believe! Starlets stripping for ‘causes’ – from cricket to cancer on their websites, fail to get anyone drooling. Whether it’s a Poonam Pandey or some other hungry-for-publicity Bollywood aspirant, Indian viewers have pretty much seen it all... and yawned. So which rabbit is Mr Hefner going to pull out of his hat ... rather, toupee? If that Bunny is called Sherlyn, I don’t see too many takers.

More than forty years ago, Katy Mirza, a petite Parsi girl from Mumbai with a truly impressive chest, packed her bags and left to join the Playboy Club in London. People were mildly interested ... yes. But it wasn’t as if Katy made front page news. Her decision was seen in the right context – as a smart and lucrative career move. Perhaps, it is just that for Sherlyn as well. Once we tire of Sherlyn’s birthday suit pictures, there will be several other Indian girls who will happily bare all for Hugh and his crew. Big deal. All one can hope is that these women have the good sense to hire sharp agents and make a decent living out of removing their clothes for the cameras. Presumably, there are enough

voyeurs still left in the world (or in India), who will be mad enough to pick up a copy of a magazine that is still attempting to cash in on the old tits-and-ass formula. Really Hugh! It is so depressingly last century!

As for our girl Sherlyn, this is her time to milk the story for all its worth – someone should tell her she's in great company. Perhaps Sherlyn can check with her granny? Maybe even Grans is much younger than good old Hugh, who still hangs on to the title of 'The Dirtiest Old Man on Earth'. The real fun will begin if Sherlyn becomes Hugh's latest fiancée and moves into the Playboy Mansion to join his harem. But I seriously doubt if even that stunt will sell more copies of *Playboy* in India. Our idea of dirty pictures is different ... aha .... Now, if Hugh were to give the luscious Vidya a call, India would definitely sing a different tune that goes Ooh-la-la .... Ooh-la-la ....!

## SUNNY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN ...

India, with all its crazy contradictions, still manages to surprise.

Our broad acceptance across the board of Sunny Leone, an adult content films performer (porn star, to put it bluntly and crudely), continues to baffle. Not only does Sunny have a starring role in a Bollywood movie, last year she was invited to 'grace the Navratri celebrations' in ultra-conservative Narendra Modi territory - Gujarat. Durga! Durga! On one level, this new openness is a great big leap forward for a nation that has earlier remained obstinately stuck in a pseudo-moralistic morass. But the Navratri invite to Gujarat has definitely sent out mixed signals.

Navratri is considered a particularly auspicious period for Hindus, preceding Dussehra and Diwali. Gujarat virtually explodes with elaborately staged Dandiya Raas nights during the nine-day festival. Navratri's unwanted pregnancies used to be Gujarat's worst kept secret. In such a confused cultural hot pot, it was inevitable that a canny organizer came up with the Sunny Leone masterstroke. There is big money riding on these colourful nine nights. Youngsters spend extravagantly to deck up for the festivities, often saving up chunks of their income to buy nine sets of fancy costumes. Quick to cash in on the occasion, organizers invest in hiring Bollywood and television stars to perform on the vast grounds that attract

thousands of dancers night after night. Even by these OTT standards, hiring a porn star was an inspired move indeed!

Sunny herself is attempting a serious makeover after brazening it out in the Bigg Boss house. She wants to go respectable (but why, honey?). This transformation is worthy of an independent reality show, if only an enterprising producer would get Ms Leone to cooperate, which shouldn't be too difficult. It's a great India story! Here's a hot Punjabi *kudi* from Canada who has established herself in the highly competitive international porn movies market with steamy films directed by her husband. Her liberal parents know about her day job as an adult film performer, and are fine with it. They respect her choice of career and encourage her to excel.

But aha, look at what happened once she came to the country of her origin (India). She swiftly figured her future is here, given the extraordinary amount of publicity she generated from day one. Opportunities galore came her way, and soon Sunny became a brand. And, since every brand comes with a price tag, she smartly decided to cash in on hers. She also went in for some timely strategies designed to make her old job look better. For one, she insisted she would not kiss her co-stars in Bollywood! For another, she talked of being a devoted and faithful wife, lucky enough to be married to a progressive, liberal guy who understands her line of work. The message is loud and clear: Hands off, guys! It seems to be working. She is now referred to as Sunnyji. Soon she'll be bhabhiji. And her transformation from a liberated Canada-based porn star, to a saree clad Bharatiya Nari will be complete.

This sort of a fairytale ending to an unconventional life is possible only in India. We'd seen it earlier with Raakhi Sawant. We saw it with Pakistani starlet Veena Malik. And now we have Sunny Leone living the dream. That's a

pretty remarkable breakthrough in our prissy, judgmental attitude and it has taken place in under a decade. Poor Silk Smitha was not as fortunate. Sunny Leone's transition is a fascinating account of India's love-hate relationship with women who run with the wolves. Despite our pretensions and protestations, we are at a significant cultural crossroad that will determine where we go from here.

My own feeling is that the fake and exaggerated Devi complex ('We worship women ... because we worship Durga') men in our society project, is finally ready to get a decent and overdue burial. Today's Indian woman is neither a Devi nor a whore. She is herself. A Sunny Leone is free to participate in porn films that titillate millions across the world, and yet retain her right to re-invent herself at will, as a loving wife and dutiful daughter, doing what a gal has to do to make a living in these recessionary times. Clearly, large segments within India are willing to give her that chance - no questions asked. That, to me, represents a remarkable shift which grants the required space to a woman to exercise choice, even if that choice happens to be radical. So far, I have not come across any protests from those self-righteous groups that take it upon themselves to guard us from 'evil influences'. In that context, the Sunny Leone saga does indeed represent a moral bastion being successfully stormed and torn down.

The only downside? Heavy breathing will never be the same again!

## IZZAT-VIZZAT

Self-esteem. Honour. Self-respect. Izzat. For most women that's what it boils down to.

The real star of Sridevi's comeback vehicle is Gouri Shinde, the writer-director of this season's most endearing hit - *English-Vinglish*. Of course, Sri is terrific. Even after disappearing from the screen for fifteen long years, it was a given that Sri would rock! Audiences love Sri. But it is to Sri's credit that when she did choose to get back into the movies, she picked an unconventional and modest vehicle. Devoid of star trappings, stripped off the accoutrements of glamour, this tender slice of life was a big gamble, more for Sri than her first time director-writer, Gouri.

Unlike some of her equally dazzling contemporaries, Sri could have selected a major production house with mega budgets. Why, Sri could very easily have roped in her successful producer-husband, Boney Kapoor. He'd have happily put together a carefully calibrated project with a gigantic publicity campaign to showcase the missus. Instead, she picked Shinde's quirky film about a Puneri wife with zero English language skills, who, on her maiden trip to America, decides to enroll in a 'Learn English in Four Weeks' school. What follows doesn't just surprise her; it astonishes her family as well.

Coming back to the question of a desi woman's izzat, there is a marvelously nuanced scene in which a South

Indian techie named Rama, tells off Laurent, an amorous Frenchman who has flipped for Shashi (Sri), during class. Laurent declares his feelings for her in front of the other students and teacher, thereby embarrassing Shashi, the much married, mother of two. She is affronted and hurt, while the rest of the small class is taken aback by Laurent's audacity. Rama ticks him off saying: 'Show some respect ... she is not a French woman. She is Indian. You cannot *lagao* line so openly ... and insult her.' Laurent reluctantly withdraws.

Sri's reactions to him after his public declaration are superbly captured, as the audience understands and appreciates her dilemma perfectly. This is a significant cultural statement that neatly and subtly sums up how tradition and conditioning score over vanity and attraction. Sri/Shashi does not succumb to the Frenchman's ample charms, even though her marriage has deeply eroded her self-esteem! I'm sure there are thousands of women in the audience who wished she had! I did! Who can resist Laurent, with his kind eyes, his gentle ways, and his sweet, sincere words? As Shashi tells him later: 'You made me feel good about myself.' Sure. But what about him? Poor Laurent.

Watching Nandita Das playing Maya in her brand new play, *Between the Lines*, I was struck by the common concerns, even though the context is entirely different. Maya is a gold medallist at college, a brilliant lawyer, married for ten years to her law school mate, another brilliant lawyer. She is dealing with self-esteem issues as well. Not just in her personal life but also in the life of a woman whose case she suddenly decides to take up. Accused of attempted murder, the woman decides to hire Maya to defend her.

Maya gets completely embroiled in the woman's life, even after she discovers she is pitted in court against her own husband, who is representing Bhonsale, the man who has been shot at by his oppressed, abused wife. Maya

begins to re-examine her own life. Is her marriage really all that charmed and wonderful? Has her husband failed to recognize her ambitions and dreams? Will their relationship survive the murder trial? And which one of them will win the case? If her husband loses to her, will he take that personally? And if Maya wins, will it mean the start of a brand new chapter in their lives that could adversely impact the delicate domestic equation?

A woman's self-respect is rarely tabled in a marriage, much less understood. It is taken for granted that the many roles she plays ungrudgingly within the family are the one she loves. But it isn't always so, as Maya reminds her husband.

Both, the movie and the play, concentrate on exploring the complex inner landscape of a woman's life. Both succeed admirably. Sri's Shashi, and Nandita's Maya are women one can easily empathize with, even if their choices and circumstances are so very different. At the end of it all, what both want is respect from those who share their lives – spouses and children. Surely, that's not too much to ask? The good part is that both women eventually find that elusive emotion (self-esteem), albeit after quite a struggle.

However, I have to be honest ... in Shashi's place I would most definitely have opted for Laurent. It needs a Frenchman to compare a woman's eyes to drops of coffee with a little milk mixed into them! On the other hand – which sensible man could possibly resist Sri/Shashi?

## STRANGE BUT TRUE!

In Bollywood, established models frequently turn into fairly successful movie stars (start counting - from Aishwarya Rai to Jacqueline Fernandes).

That doesn't necessarily happen in Hollywood (Naomi Campbell flopped spectacularly. Kate Moss was clever enough not to go there). But something horrendous takes place when the same pretty ladies we drool over in movies start showing up on covers of hard core fashion magazines. I mean, those sadistic stylists should be clobbered for turning gorgeous gals into visual nightmares. Poor Lara Dutta. Poor Priyanka Chopra. Poor Katrina Kaif. Why do these yummy heroines agree to go along with those dreadful make-overs (which are really make-unders)? Do they not have any creative control over their published pictures? What about their image consultants? Don't they have approval rights? And why on earth do magazine editors insist on inflicting these horrors on us unsuspecting, trusting readers?

I asked this question to an international publisher and the very chic editor of a super stylish glossy. This is a sin, I said in my usual, polite and understated way. Most of our former beauty queens are seriously good looking women. They have personality and style in spades. What is the idea behind radically transforming their appearance? Why make them look like ghouls auditioning for 'transformers'? Just look at some recent covers. Not only are they unflattering

in the extreme, they make me wonder whether the whole concept is to promote an ‘ugh’ look!

The publisher looked at his editor, who summoned the stylist and the three of them got their marketing director on speed dial. After going into a huddle for twenty minutes, they came to where I was standing (minding my own business, as always!). I noticed all three were beaming. I looked at their triumphant expressions and waited for enlightenment. Something major was about to be revealed. I held my breath in anticipation. It was as if the da Vinci code was about to be cracked. The crew exchanged significant glances before the publisher spoke. He pulled himself up to his full height, drew in his breath and announced: ‘Advertisers prefer movie stars on covers.’

Wooooah! Man! What an incredible revelation! I let out my breath and beamed back. All of us clinked glasses, ordered another round of drinks and shook our heads enthusiastically. We were in total agreement. Advertisers are gods. Movie stars sell more mags. Everybody goes home happy. Finito.

Given that the golden rule of running profitable magazines in these highly competitive times revolves around the number of ads pulled in, one can understand the ‘advertisers as god’ thinking. Jump, says the advertisers. And editors ask for stools. The bigger the brand, the higher one jumps. If the snooty brand demands indecent discounts, hungry editors gladly oblige. The rather dodgy explanation goes like this: If other, less snooty advertisers see the fancy brand in the mag, they experience an overwhelming need to share the same glorious space. This is a world-wide phenomenon. And naturally, top dogs take full advantage of their lofty position. All these are givens.

But I still don’t understand why our fabulous looking movie stars agree to look like dish rags in order to qualify

as the fashion world's little darlings. Why do designers insist on creating weird, unflattering outfits for these divas instead of pumping up their glam quotient still further? Why convert them into unrecognizable nobodies, when they are perfectly recognizable somebody in reality? If it's a question of cosy arrangements with brands these celebs endorse, all the more reason to make them look still more amazing! It strikes me as being pretty perverse, if not downright odd, that high profile fashion savvy stylists should go out of their way to conceptualize such unappealing covers. Pourquoi?

That leaves the neglected, dejected model brigade. I recently ran into Shraddha Kapoor and was impressed by her beauty, poise and conduct. She is one person who has struck the right balance between her modelling career (she's on top of her game, being the face of Lakme), and movies (where she still has to make it big). Shraddha has what it takes to straddle both worlds effortlessly. Some of her contemporaries are not as fortunate. However, each fashion week throws up a potential star. There are countless young girls auditioning for those punishing cat-walk slots, who are equally terrific! They have the right body lingo, plus the attitude to make perfect clothes horses. I'd rather see these unknowns gracing fashion shoots. I'd rather look at a fresh face on the cover of an international magazine, than another Bollywood has-been, trying a bit too hard to look super hot.

So, what's the solution? For starters, sack the stylists, forthwith! Let Bollywood beauties look like movie stars. Let our professional models do their job. Let readers, not advertisers, decide what works.

But errr ... before we get there, one painful question remains: Who let the dogs out??

## CHAK DE, GALS!

*R*arely does a commercial Hindi film attempt the impossible - a sincere look at contemporary gender issues.

Throw in a healthy dose of desh bhakti, and chances are what emerges is a yucky mish-mash of ideas going nowhere. But a movie that succeeded big time in marrying feminism to patriotism, while making a strong pitch for national integration and communal harmony was 2007's big hit, *Chak De! India*, produced under the Yash Raj banner, and sensitively directed by Shimit Amin. But, as we know, a shrewdly-timed release does not always assure box office success.

Nobody in the family wanted to accompany me when I suggested watching the movie on the eve of Independence Day. 'Oh God! I'm sure it will be one of those boring, preachy films in the "Mera Bharat Mahan" tradition,' groaned one daughter, while another feigned an instant stomach ache. I didn't know what 'Chak de' meant, but it sounded catchy enough. I asked a Punjabi friend to translate, and she sent back a text which said it was a popular expression that loosely meant 'eff it'... but in an affectionate way. Really? Hmmmm ... this I had to see.

It was obvious from the opening shot itself that the film was not about to pull any punches. Kabir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan) had been dubbed a traitor for not scoring a crucial goal against Pakistan in an international hockey final

between the two rivals. Oh, oh! The film was certainly taking a head on approach - it's true that any Muslim player's lapse in such a situation would automatically be seen as a betrayal, even a murky, match fixing deal. What followed was a story that tackled several tricky issues equally bluntly, without ever falling into the trap of sensationalizing any of them.

Unlike a *Rang de Basanti* by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra which was hailed in 2006 as a great film that lit countless nationalistic fires in people's hearts, *Chak De! India* avoided jingoism and melodrama, opting for a far more sophisticated approach that conveyed what is needed in a subtle, understated way. Considering there was no romantic angle in the film, and the female characters were unknown teenagers from across India, it was a feat to keep interest levels high through the narrative. Besides a deglamourized Shah Rukh Khan playing the tough, uncompromising coach to this rag tag team of hockey players, there were zero attractions or distractions, which was a big thing in itself.

The most delightful aspect of the movie for me was the portrayal of the embittered ex-hockey star (Shah Rukh) who volunteers for the rather thankless job of licking this straggly team together for the women's World Cup. Nobody believes he can do it. Nobody gives the girls a chance in hell to come back with the trophy. If anything, both SRK and the girls are expected to fail ... which they nearly do. Then came the unexpected twist which showed the coach adopting a brilliant stand against gender discrimination by insisting on his girls taking on the national men's team. Of course, the girls lose, but not before putting up a convincing fight.

Similarly, when their team is out to lunch at a local eatery, the girls from the North East find themselves at the receiving end of lewd remarks from a couple of men at an adjoining table. The team unites to give the men a thorough thrashing (at this point, nearly every woman in the audience

cheered, no doubt in memory of similar sexual harassment they themselves had endured). That scene alone was worth the price of a ticket, since it handles a particularly nasty social phenomenon most women in our country have had to passively put up with for years.

There were several other well-conceived set pieces in the film that were unambiguously pro-women. This was such a welcome change from the usual stereotyping that we are accustomed to watching in movie after movie. The restraint and dignity with which Shah Rukh conducts himself throughout is admirable considering he is a devastatingly attractive coach in charge of sixteen young and ambitious women. What could have descended into a cheesy melodrama in the end (*Rang de Basanti*), managed to retain its high levels of integrity right till the final frame. All the girls played their parts with the required earnestness, and the director wisely refrained from putting them into clichéd regional boxes, even as he took a few potshots at the gross ignorance other filmmakers display towards south Indians and people from the North East. To successfully tackle such an array of prejudices is no small feat.

*Chak De! India* rightly deserved recognition for going bravely into No Man's Land and emerging triumphant. Bravo!

## RAT ‘RACE’?

*F*rankly, I was reeling by the end of the film.

If you missed Soham Shah’s multi-starrer *Race* released in 2008, you really missed something. It was a relentlessly wicked film. And when I say ‘wicked’, I mean it.

Rarely has a mainstream Indian movie glorified greed in quite the same way as *Race*. The premise of the story was based on the making of money. Period. Every single character was after just one thing - more moolah. And, in order to achieve that objective, nothing or no one was allowed to stand in the way. Brothers cold-bloodedly planned each other’s murder; their girlfriends thought nothing of duping and double crossing their partners. Why, even the investigating officer was after his generous cut! In other words, there were only bad guys (and gals) in this set up. You might say what’s so new about all this? Plenty, as it turned out.

Indian films have an old, old tradition of basing stories along mythological lines. The context may be modern, but the themes rarely go beyond the good *vs.* evil theme. Villains and vamps are clearly delineated, and audiences are fed a morality tale that follows a familiar tradition in which evil never ever triumphs over good. Oh ... bad people have to pay for their crimes by the time the titles roll.

In *Race* all the old rules were broken in one stroke. Interestingly enough, not a single character preached any

moral message. Looting, killing, sleeping around were the givens, minus any apology or explanation. Gratuitous violence was the name of the game, and nobody was spared. Treacherous girlfriends? Sure. Psychotic siblings? Yup. Venal cops? You got them. Vicious business partners - hey, are there any other kind? Perhaps, this was the first Hindi commercial film to venture boldly into unknown territory by doing away with virtue altogether. The fact that the film was a huge commercial success, says a great deal about changing moral values in our society. Especially when it comes to the representation of women.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the heroine had to be a vestal virgin, pure as driven snow. Untouched and innocent, clad in pristine white (film maker Yash Chopra's ultimate fantasy), the female protagonist came through as a creature who embodied the traditional Indian dream. If she was shown as a 'westernized' outsider (Kareena Kapoor as 'Pooh' in *Kabbie Khushi Kabhi Gham*), she invariably found herself 'reformed' by society and the love of an honourable man. About five years ago that stereotype was replaced by a more contemporary version of the modern day Bharatiya Naari, who wore risqué costumes, danced in discos with strangers, defied her parents and fell in love with a rakish hero. But even within this new formula, she was projected as a wayward but hymen-intact girl, misled by the depraved West, attracted to the spiritual East, and ready to convert, thanks to the power of true 'pyaar'. Which is what made *Race* so exciting and provocative.

It challenged the status quo on every level, and threw up a new breed of heroines, who have no family, no support system, a suspect past, and are so aggressive when it comes to achieving their goals (money!), that they're willing to seduce (even eliminate) every male in sight! The character played by Bipasha Basu was relentlessly avaricious. Not only does she

bed her husband's brother, she is willing to kill her husband (and anyone else), who stands in her way! Ditto for Katrina Kaif, who donned many hats in her pursuit of wealth. She too had no qualms when it came to the seduction stakes. The two female leads brazenly bumped-and-ground their way into the audiences' hearts.

*Race* was declared a box office hit. To me, it was a defining moment in cinema. It marked a turning point. Back in the seventies, Amitabh Bachchan changed the stale, old format of goody-goody, chocolate-faced, saintly heroes, when he set the screen on fire as the Angry Young Man. *Race* upturned the outdated Sati Savitri imaging of women in our films and replaced it with the ruthless, self-seeking, overtly sexual creatures, who maim and murder men at will - for personal gain, of course. 'Touch me, touch me ... Kiss me, kiss me,' crooned Katrina, tantalizingly.

Goodbye, Sita. Hello, Gita! Welcome to the schizo world of new age killer babes in Bollywood.

## DARE TO BE *DEV D*

Bollywood is finally waking up, coming of age and experimenting with terrain that is risqué, out there and outrageous.

Now here's a film that slipped into movie halls without too much of a band baaja, and had the urban, multiplex moviegoer gasping for breath. Most cinemabuffs could not believe they were being 'allowed' to watch such a bold film in the first place, and that too without the lunatic fringe threatening to vandalize theatres screening it.

Since the debate du jour revolved around these self-appointed moral scouts looking for evidence that nails culprits who defy their notions of 'Bharatiya Sanskriti', this film should be made compulsory viewing for the likes of them. Their arteries may pop, but with any luck their eyes will open as well as to what's really going on in our metros, and how nobody is blinking! Here's a 21st century version of Sarat Chandra's classic: *Devdas*, which was first published in 1917. Anurag Kashyap's interpretation is so wild and original it takes a second viewing to register.

We all know the basic *Devdas* story. It revolves around an obsessive hero, who doesn't have the guts to marry his true love, and chooses to drown his sorrow in a bottle... till he meets the proverbial prostitute with a heart of gold, who loves him unconditionally, and puts up with his petulant crap. I have never understood people's fascination for *Devdas* - I

think of him as the ultimate loser. A self-pitying, weak and morose guy, who has only himself to blame. But Anurag's version of this loser is far more layered and therefore more compelling.

Abhay Deol has been given the credit for inspiring Kashyap to remake the classic in this dark and sinister mould. Deol stars as the protagonist, and delivers a competent performance. But the really riveting acts come from the two newcomers who play Paro (Mahie) and Chandramukhi (Kalki) respectively. There is nothing long-suffering about this spirited Paro, and as for Kalki, she gives phone sex in multiple languages in one key scene, with such ease that it's disturbing. The film explores and exposes the grittiest aspect of Delhi's seedy Paharganj district in cinema vérité style. But it is when the camera closes in on the faces of the two women that the film maker delivers that devastating punch in the gut. It is a ferocious portrayal of twisted lives gone horribly wrong. Dev descends into living hell as he abuses his body, subjecting it to a combination of drugs, booze and demeaning sex.

Chanda (Kalki) as a garishly made up child prostitute, catering to kinky, game-playing, sado-masochistic clients, doesn't flinch even once as she goes through the motions and mouths dialogues where she describes herself as a 'randi' and wonders aloud why society hesitates to use that word and prefers the euphemism of 'commercial sex worker' to its cruder, more direct version. Paro is sexually aggressive, an unabashed predator, who thinks nothing of emailing her bare breasted images to Dev while he's in London, or strapping a mattress to the seat of her bicycle and setting up a tryst with her lover in the middle of a sugarcane field. Both the women are entirely upfront about their sexuality and have no inhibitions expressing their voracious desires, or using their bodies commercially (Paro who opts for an

arranged marriage and dutifully sleeps with a husband she does not love, Kalki who cold-bloodedly trades her physical assets in order to continue her college education).

This marks a first for Hindi commercial cinema, which for all its synthetic attempts at depicting today's free thinking women still does not have the guts to show the heroine as anything but a vestal virgin. But here are these two actresses breaking hypocritical boundaries with boundless gusto and yet doing so with enormous grace and dignity. When Chanda calls Dev a 'slut', it is meant as a compliment. The language used throughout the film is raw, contemporary and lethal. But you don't squirm, because you know instinctively it rings true. This is life on the edge, with all its perverse traps and hideous denouements. *Dev D* socks it to the audience. The women come out on top - sexually, literally, metaphorically.

Good on you, Anurag.

## SEX, AAJ KAL

⌚ I watched Imtiaz Ali's *Love Aaj Kal* (first day, first show), and found it pretty pointless.

Obviously, thousands and thousands of young people across India didn't! Clearly, we were not on the same page on this movie. I still feel *Sex, Aaj Kal*, would have been a more apt title. Yup. Even with the vigilant censors scrutinizing the 'message for the masses'.

Fortunately, for audiences today, those old guardians of India's morality seem to be totally in sync with courtship rituals du jour. Not that Imtiaz Ali's latest film is a sex flick - far from it. It is squeaky clean and 'wholesome' in terms of explicit content or even risqué dialogues. I was more interested in the subtext. The premise is a take off on the classic 'Boy meets Girl, Boy loses Girl, Boy finds Girl,' formula, which has been done, redone and done to death by countless filmmakers over time. It is an eternal subject that invites interpretations.

In Imtiaz Ali's film, the relationship between Saif Ali Khan and Deepika Padukone is supposed to be very need based and 'today'. He has his dreams, she has hers. Since there is no such thing as a common dream these days, individual career goals matter more than personal happiness. Given that premise, the two kindred souls based in London, decide to part ways, but not without hosting a 'Break-up' party first. This is the scene that is being lapped up in theatres by the

popcorn crowd. Break ups are so coooooool. Come on let's twist again .... Like we did last summer!

Not only do the two move on immediately - he hooks up with a dumb blond, she with a dumb boss. They keep each other posted about all these developments over emails, expensive international calls and text messages. Their exchanges are breezy, casual and fun, betraying nothing, saying nothing. The pain is carefully camouflaged, cleverly managed - a common syndrome across the globe that claims millions of victims. It is during their voluntary separation that they figure out their true feelings for one another. As story lines go, this one is as ghisa-pita as dozens of rom-coms preceding it. But with Imtiaz Ali, it's the treatment and dialogues that set the film apart.

Using this movie as a pivot, it is worth asking - are our films really coming of age when it comes to dealing with sex? I'd say a big fat 'yes'. The girls no longer play vestal virgins. It is understood the leading lady has a full on physical relationship with the hero. The desi kiss remains clumsy, self conscious and unattractive, but it is still a huge improvement on earlier depictions (remember those comical sequences of two flowers meeting ... two love birds billing and cooing ... bonfires blazing?).

So...the encouraging buzz is that Bollywood couples 'do it' these days and nobody dies of shock. Neither is the girl branded a slut. More significantly, she has sex out of choice (earlier, she needed to be drugged or drunk). The man she chooses to have sex with is like Saif's character in the movie ... it's all about opportunities. He does not force himself on the girl. Neither does he abstain in order to 'protect' her honour. Since Ali has adopted a cinematic device that allows him to explore a parallel narrative (the 'old' way of wooing one's Lady Love), it is left to audiences to decide which version of love they prefer - Rishi Kapoor's or Saif Ali

Khan's. Perhaps, it is this attempt to present two sides of the same coin that has appealed to fans.

Frankly, I found both versions awfully simplistic and silly. One offers elopement as the only option. The other, a break up as a wake up call. Maybe, you need to be a die hard romantic to get either ... or both. Some critics see the movie as a true reflection of the times we live in - torn between career goals and romantic compulsions. Today's young Indians are hopelessly caught up in the same syndrome afflicting others like them across the world. Hard choices, harder resolutions. Take no prisoners, guys. The only casualty is love, itself.

Unless the guy is as cute as Saif, and the girl as hot as Deepika!

## 'SEX AND OUR CITIES'

∅ I have to confess I enjoyed it.

Agreed, the American romantic comedy film *Sex and the City*-2 shot in Abu Dhabi was a bit of a turkey. Even the super stylish gal pals clad in designer harem pants, floaty caftans and ridiculous head gear couldn't salvage the movie from box office disaster. But I enjoyed it, much to my daughters' collective amazement (the girls found it seriously dumb).

'What is there to like?' they asked.

'A lot!' I answered a trifle defensively.

And I heard a man groan: 'Dude, do I really want to know about a woman's hot flashes or listen to her menopausal rantings?'

Well, why not? Based on the famous eponymous HBO TV series and directed by Michael Patrick King *Sex and the City* has always gone into uncharted territory, be it a woman's confusion about her sexual urges, her mixed feelings about having kids, her dryness 'down there', her fears of rejection on account of her small breasts, her reluctance to get into a committed relationship ... even her odd PMS conduct. It was always out there in the popular television series, and later in the movies that followed the rather complex love/sex/professional lives of four feisty females in New York. Just the fact that these couture-clad Manhattan chicks with all their combined neuroses managed to connect with regular

women across the world, was a big enough signal heralding major change.

This is not as superficial as it sounds. While watching the film at my favourite multiplex, I was busy scanning the packed auditorium to see who was laughing and at which jokes. Interestingly, the film opens with an elaborate gay wedding sequence with Carrie playing the best man. Her husband (Mr. Big, if you please!), cracks several politically incorrect jokes about gays, and it's okay to do it - yes - just as movies crack jokes about other minorities. Nobody is spared these days - Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians. So why treat gays with kid gloves? This openness is entirely welcome and it was good to see so many gays in the audience laughing with everybody else. That's confidence.

Two weeks later, I was at a lunch with a mixed group of professionals who happened to be discussing *Sex and the City* avidly. One of the men said he had learned so much about women from the film - their really, really personal secrets and sexual foibles that men rarely get a chance to figure out on their own. He claimed that as a student in America during the heyday of the television series, he would watch Carrie and her friends closely to pick up a few cues about dating on campus. Later in life, when he decided to get married, and the *Sex and the City* ladies had also moved on to dealing with domesticity, he was glued once again to their new selves as they negotiated various marital hurdles. He gave the example of Carrie's failed wedding the first time round, when the wedding preparations turned into a public circus and became much bigger than the ceremony itself. It reminded him of his own despair as he watched his bride-to-be getting caught in the familiar trap of staging a full on 'designer wedding' at which the two of them would be reduced to playing puppets in ridiculously extravagant couture.

Similarly, I exchanged notes with a few post-menopausal friends who had chortled and choked through the accurately hilarious scenes featuring the 50-plus sexual predator Samantha popping a cocktail of multi-coloured pills to balance her yo yo-ing hormones. There was another telling scene which showed Samantha hastily applying a lubricating cream to her private parts before setting out on a date. Too personal? Too gross? Of course! But hey .... too true, too!

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Here I recall having reviewed the first *Sex and the City* released in 2008 which showed that Carrie's most enduring relationship is with her Blahniks. Not so surprising to discover Carrie would prefer sexy designer sandals in electric blue, to sex with a beefy and boring fellow called Mr. Big! As over hyped movies go, the movie laid an egg as far as I am concerned. It gave both - sex and the city - a very bad name!

There was hardly any sex (unless you count a pooch energetically humping soft toys) and New York (definitely one of the world's sexiest cities), was not shot at its sexy best, either. So, what does that leave? Four rather unattractive, over the hill women, trying to be sexy! The men in their lives are uniformly unsexy, making one wonder why the options these days are so limited in Manhattan, which for years has been projected as the dream destination for singles looking for ... what else ... sex.

The main problem with the 2008 released dud was the timing. The movie version of the hit television series was ten years too late hitting the screens. So much had changed in the interim, including the looks of the four leading ladies, who looked about as fresh as dried up turnips. What they were saying about themselves, is still more depressing and

dated. Carrie was dying to snag Mr. Big and get 'official' status as a wife. Samantha was still dealing with a monstrous sex drive that manifested itself through binge eating and buying that silly dog which was 'at it' all the time (if the mistress wasn't having sex, at least her pet was!). Charlotte wanted to achieve the perfect domestic picture, complete with a bonny baby, while she is sick of Steve, her doormat of a husband, but not ready to explore other options.

This was not the 21st century, I'm sorry. The ladies could be Jane Austen's creations ludicrously placed in a contemporary setting. But they definitely were not today's women. Consider these anachronisms: the four female protagonists have just one main objective and that is to ensnare a man. Much of their time is spent longing for men - male companionship, respectability via marriage, acceptance by other women thanks to the men they've bagged, and a depressingly bourgeois life as the ultimate reward. Whereas, the original show had created history by tapping into the minds of independent, sexually liberated career women who did not shrivel up and die without male attention. On the contrary, they reveled in their own space.

How could the film makers have misjudged the zeitgeist so completely? For instance, the answer to the question 'what do women want?' these days, is likely to get a whole range of responses, but those will certainly not be dominated by the word 'MEN'. In all fairness, there are a few scenes in the movie that do tell the truth about the real equation between the sexes, but those are way too sketchy to hold the weak script together. It was only the 'chick flick' moments that linger.

But even those scenes were not in tune with today. Which mature woman pitifully pines for a date on Valentine's Day? Why is Carrie that interested in marching up the aisle with a block of wood called BIG? Is it just the money (Mr. Big

makes big bucks), the limos and the gifts (\$500 dollar shoes and a walk-in closet the size of a suburban flat)? If that is the only attraction, how different is Carrie from last century's gold digger? NO! The movie was totally out of sync with today's woman, who can afford to buy her own penthouse and Manolo Blahniks. Why would she trade in her independence for a cad who leaves her weeping on their wedding day because he gets cold feet at the last minute?

Samantha is single, nearly 50, and desperate for sex. Fine. Does she get what she wants? Nope. Why not? Because she is old-fashioned enough to be faithful to her boyfriend while fantasizing about Dante, the hunk next door. So, what does Samantha do? She decides to perk up her boring sex life by lying naked on the sun deck of her condo covered with hand rolled sushi! It's the one scene in the movie that is genuinely funny! Funny, but not erotic.

When the boyfriend finally shows up three hours late, the sushi is only fit to be fed to a cat! Realization dawns eventually when she admits the problem in the relationship is that she loves herself more than she loves the guy! That was the other moment of modern truth that may have rung a few familiar bells in female hearts. Other than that, it was such a disappointing movie - women in search of labels and love (in that order). Well, there were plenty of labels here (Louis Vuitton, Gucci et al). But love? None. Unless you count the pooch's fixation with the soft toy!

Would a desi *Sex and the City* work in India? Nope.

I remember being asked to write a pilot for a major channel a few years ago. I did take a crack at it - but the female boss baulked at what I thought was a pretty tame version of the original. She was right. It would never have worked. We want our own lives to be presented in a sanitized, air brushed way - like none of this ever happens to us. We don't want to acknowledge that our urban selves are not

all that different from Carrie or Samantha or Charlotte or Miranda. Well, let me tell you we have them all in our vibrant society. Only, we want to pretend they don't exist. Which is also why our top rated soaps today celebrate rural 'values' and applaud child marriage along with other 'traditional' virtues. India is way too hypocritical to own up to its own Carrie Bradshaws.

But show me one local fashionista who wouldn't want to be in her Louboutins!



*Two*

**‘O’ AND MORE:  
WOMEN UNLIMITED**

## GUNS AND ROSES!

Something terrifying is taking place in urban India - and it is giving love a very bad name!

Readers may recall that sometime back, newspapers in Mumbai were filled with horrific details about a crime of passion, involving a luscious 'model' called Moon Das, her besotted lover from Rourkela, a certain Avinash Patnaik, and their respective family members. Going by available data, the small town guy had fallen big time for the big city glam gal during one of her stage shows, and decided she was the one for him.

While details kept changing, one thing remained clear - Patnaik drove a really long distance from his home, armed with a weapon, and with vengeance in his heart. He was all set to confront Moon, who had been thwarting his advances, and settle scores once and for all. He waited for his lover to return to her suburban flat late one night, while she was out with another man. If this is sounding like a Mahesh Bhatt script, don't worry, I'm sure Mahesh has already registered the story based on this tragedy.

Well... Moon was greeted with a barrel of a gun, as Patnaik flew into a fit of jealousy. Incredibly enough, Moon and her beau-of-the-moment, showed tremendous presence of mind, by shutting the door on Patnaik's face and locking it from the outside, before rushing to the nearest cop station. In the interim, Patnaik turned the gun on the two defenceless

occupants of the flat, Moon's mother and maternal uncle and shot them dead, before killing himself. That was the flow of events so far.

Patnaik was dead. So were two innocents. Moon positioned herself as a Joan of Arc, and wonder of wonders, got herself a bravery award! Her interviews were splashed in countless mass circulated publications, clad in alluring bikini tops, while offering quotes that sounded as they had been generated by a canny talent scout. There was speculation that such a young person, would want to flee at the first opportunity, after losing her mother. Mumbai offers little solace to those who mess up. It was thought Moon would prefer the comfort zone of Kolkata, her home town, rather than dealing with pesky journos and intrusive television-wallahs after the trauma she has endured.

Hell no! Moon had discovered the world's most addictive narcotic - fame. And she wasn't going to leave! After weeping into her pretty scarves, making sure not to smudge the mascara, or dislodge those coloured lenses, Moon announced her decision to dig in her heels and go for the main chance, right here in the very city that had taken away her beloved mother. Of course, Moon was doing it all for mummy! She planned to make it big in Bollywood just like mummy always wanted! Moon wanted to make sure she lived upto mummy's dreams ... and that's the only reason Moon was not packing her bags just yet!

Hats off to the spunky girl. Even Mahesh Bhatt couldn't have scripted it better.

There were several troubling issues involved though, the most crucial one being the tattered state of emotional investments in today's stressed out times. Forget the charges from the Patnaik family that accused Moon of being nothing more than a ruthless gold digger, who took advantage of a rich man's devotion to her. Papa Patnaik even furnished

copies of incriminatory bank transactions which establish that his son had indeed transferred considerable funds into Moon's account. There was photographic evidence to show that Moon's family had holidayed with Patnaik at his expense.

Obviously, something went horribly wrong at some point. What was that 'something'? Was Moon nothing more than an avaricious call girl milking her wealthy lover? Did she sell her sexuality in order to get ahead? Cheesy, semi-nude cover shots for *Debonair* started doing the rounds. Was her mother a party to all this? Did mummy actually encourage Moon to exploit her physical assets? Was it nothing but greed that drove Moon's family to trade in on the girl's ample assets?

Who then was the vamp of the piece and who the victim? Three people died. Soon, the cops lost interest in getting to the bottom of this whodunit (Patnaik's family saw it as a murder). Moon was the one who escaped - literally and metaphorically. How she will choose to handle her future would be fascinating to monitor. However, cold-bloodedly speaking, Moon couldn't have asked for a bigger break! From being just another anonymous starlet looking for roles, she was elevated to the front pages of tabloids - a huge leap, in terms of 'brand awareness'. The price? A dead mother.

Wonder what Moon would consider fair 'compensation' for that loss!

## O MARIA!

Is it Maria? Or is it Just Mumbai?

I recall that over three years back, in May 2008, to be precise, readers and television viewers were riveted by a bizarre story that was unfolding in front of them. A young and attractive actress from Kannada films, Maria Susairaj, was picked up for questioning by the cops, for the astonishingly brutal murder of Neeraj Grover, a man she barely knew. Her accomplice in the ghastly crime was her so-called fiancé, a Kochi-based naval lieutenant, Emile Jerome Mathew.

What was truly horrifying about the act was the attitude of the culprits, Maria and her lover Jerome, who cold bloodedly butchered an innocent man. As if the elaborate attempts to cover up the crime were not devilish enough, it later turned out the two had a Plan B in place, which was to try and fool investigating officers still further. But the murderers had not taken one important factoid into account when they tried to pass off their cock and bull story of the mysterious disappearance of Neeraj Grover - top cop Rakesh Maria.

Now here's a cop with not just a first rate, razor sharp mind, but an impeccable track record (he's the same guy who'd picked up Sanjay Dutt after the Bombay bomb blasts). Maria the starlet, ever the consummate actress, had had the temerity to meet her namesake, Maria the cop, to file a missing person report, about the man she and her

boyfriend had chopped into several pieces, stuffed the body parts into large bags bought by her from a neighbourhood supermarket, and then burnt to cinders in a remote wood close to the beach. If this is sounding like a C-grade movie script penned by an out-of-job crime writer, the truth was still worse!

Going by available data, Maria came to Mumbai, the ultimate babe magnet, to get roles in television serials/movies and become rich and famous. It is a common enough dream in this showbiz city which lures thousands of hopefuls month after month. Once they get here, they stay put, regardless of the ugly underbelly that swallows several victims. Distant suburbs are full of these ragged armies in search of that elusive ticket to overnight money and glory. Some fall by the wayside, others manage to hang on; still others branch out into a life of drugs, prostitution and crime. Very, very few make it. And then again, at what cost?

Maria's story is extreme in what eventually transpired. It may have played out differently had her suspicious 'fiancé' Jerome not showed up on her doorstep at the crack of dawn and caught her in a compromising situation with Neeraj - the man Maria was hoping would get her what she most wanted - a break. There are any numbers of Marias floating around the fringes of Bollywood. The television industry is no stranger to these desperados either, who are willing to do anything for the chance to be on camera. For every one Maria, there are a hundred Neerajs - men who boast about their 'contacts' and promise 'intros' to influential people. It is a mutually understood arrangement between two consulting adults - one hungry for money, the other, hungry for sex. So it was with these two....

Till of course, the jealous 'other' arrived on the scene. What followed is right out of a film noir - a black and evil deed, perpetrated with zero remorse. According to Maria's

early confessions, she and Jerome had sex twice over, after murdering Neeraj. It is assumed Maria had also had sex with the dead man a few hours prior to her lover's arrival. Which psychiatrist in the world will be able to throw some light on what appears to be wildly aberrant behaviour?

The question is: Was Maria always a sick person? Or did Mumbai turn her into a monster? Can we blame the city for perverting the minds of those who flock here hoping for a rub off ... such glamour! So much moolah! What fame! Are girls like Maria vamps or victims? One man is dead. The other is in jail. While she herself went on singing like a canary, changing her tune on a daily basis. One day she claimed Jerome raped her at knife point. On another day she insisted it was Neeraj who attacked Jerome in the first place.

Soon, she was forgotten, as was Moon Das, but the Mumbai magnet will continue to attract women like them - good looking, unscrupulous, manipulative and heartless. How many will have to die before society wakes up? I am sure a canny film maker has already commissioned a story based on this grisly tragedy. Well ... that's showbiz. Cruel till the bitter end. Either it kills you, or you kill someone.

Role, anyone?

## FULL DISCLOSURE

*W*hat could possibly have driven a 22-year-old woman from arch conservative Rajkot to strip down to her underwear in public?

Was she an exhibitionist out to make headlines? Or a desperate housewife left with no option but to take such a drastic step in order to attract attention to her cause?

Whatever it was that pushed Pooja Chauhan to disrobe and take to the streets a few years back, the image of an attractive young woman walking determinedly down a busy road, snug black knickers and a well-fitting white brassiere, certainly made the required impact. One particular television channel ran the clip non-stop throughout the day, in a manner that was more about leering journalism than breaking news story. But that's the way the cookie crumbles, and I'm sure Pooja was well aware of the sensation her defiant act would create.

The interesting aspect of her performance was the kind of reactions she triggered off - most of the remarks dealt with her wow figure. Had Pooja been a grossly overweight middle aged, unattractive victim of harassment, chances are she'd have been dismissed as a crackpot and bundled off to the nearest cop station. Most people would have laughed at her exposed body and ridiculed her anguish. The power of youth and beauty is such - and Pooja was definitely beautiful. Viewers and readers could not tear their eyes away

from the brave young woman, just as I couldn't tear my own eyes away from monitoring the lustful expressions of passers by. By that single action of hers, Pooja not just jolted the very conservative Gujarati society she lived in, but drew the required attention to the underlying hypocrisy in our society at large.

Pooja's plight was not an isolated one. Why, in Rajkot itself there must be several Poojas suffering at the hands of cruel in-laws. Yet, it took a Pooja to decide on taking a drastic, attention-grabbing step to highlight her condition, when all other efforts failed. Why were the police so indifferent to her earlier pleas? Why did they refuse to register a case against her husband and in-laws? Was it because the police really do not consider physical abuse in such cases serious enough?

I think that is the real and rather horrifying reason. So often, I have intervened in street fights featuring young brides getting thrashed by a drunken beast of a husband. Each time, I've been told to mind my own business and get lost by the cops, who've looked the other way and 'advised' me to follow suit. 'It's a routine family matter,' they generally say, while admitting brazenly that in their book they don't really consider it a crime as such. 'It is common in our society ... we have more important cases to deal with,' they shrug before strolling away to collect their hafta from a local gangster.

In Pooja's case, something worse seemed to have happened. Driven to the wall by police apathy and a system that makes light of such torture, she took the only route she thought would wake up the authorities who'd ignored her complaints. Soon, Pooja was known all over India – perhaps for the wrong reasons. The danger was how she would deal with the aftermath, once she herself has provided fodder to a sensation-seeking media. If she decided to become a drama

queen doling out quotable quotes, she would do herself and a lot of women trapped in similar situations, a serious disservice. Pooja would then reduce herself to a caricatural and pathetic figure of hate and ridicule. Critics would crow: 'I told you so,' and dismiss her as an unbalanced, hysterical, exhibitionistic woman out to garner cheap publicity. Her in-laws would become victims first and heroes later, and Mahesh Bhatt will promptly announce his next film based on Pooja's tattered life.

In fact, Pooja became the Phoolan Devi of the 21st century in an almost grotesque way. Phoolan was stripped naked and paraded by the Thakurs in order to teach her a lesson. Pooja reversed the process by stripping herself! The objective in both cases was humiliation via what is still considered the ultimate shame for a woman - a public display of her naked body. Pooja used the last weapon left in her paltry arsenal. She traded in her modesty in order to fight back. What does that make Pooja? A vamp or a modern day Draupadi conducting her own vastra haran to expose society while exposing herself?

You decide ....

## WOMEN WITH MAGIC FINGERS

*S*I never miss the opportunity to visit exhibitions that showcase the works of our vast and hugely gifted crafts community.

Especially when a committed NGO is involved in helping those underprivileged craftspeople to market their products. 'Sadhna' was started in Udaipur with just fifteen women. That was 1988. Now, there are over 600 women workers who also happen to be stake holders of this enterprise. I happened to meet some of them when they exhibited in Mumbai recently. One particular lady broke my heart. She was a young widow with a son to raise. The fate of such a woman in our closed and cruel society is pre-determined - she doesn't stand a chance in hell. Her in-laws keep her under virtual house arrest, if they keep her at all. Her own family rejects her (poverty being the main cause), and the rest of society has no further use for such a person. Shunned and ostracized, especially in as hierarchical a society as the one in Rajasthan, such women are condemned to a life of abject misery, driving some to commit suicide, or worse, sati (Rajasthan's dark and disgusting secret).

Well, this woman was saved from either tragedy. Why? Because she has magic in her fingers! And she was fortunate. 'Sadhna' gave her the chance to convert her skills into a livelihood. 'Sadhna' gave this grief-stricken woman her life back.

Today, she earns enough to look after her young son, educate him, and plan his future. She not only manages her time well, but also her financial resources. She operates her own bank account, saves for a rainy day, has insurance cover and is leading a life of dignity. As one of the many highly motivated office bearers of 'Sadhna' told me, this lady who was not allowed to step outside her modest home, now makes it to Mumbai as a core member of the team and proudly displays her work to discerning buyers.

It's Mumbai today, it may be Manhattan tomorrow. A better future beckons and with these amazing opportunities, chances are, her only child will be able to improve his own destiny and make something of his life. Despite these advantages, I found tears in her eyes as I admired her embroidery and complimented her on her skills. She tried to hide them, but when I put my arms around her to ask: 'What's wrong?' she broke down completely. In real terms, even someone like her, who is empowered enough to feed herself and her son, still faces a bleak tomorrow. 'Sadhna' is her surrogate family for now. But how much 'izzat' does society at large give such a woman? She is young - still in her thirties. She faces possibly fifty years of loneliness ahead, given our extended life span.

The question of starting over, remarriage, does not arise in her situation. Village elders, already suspicious and hostile, would hack her to death if she were to as much as suggest such an option. It is a small miracle she is allowed to work and get out of her house at all. This is an even bigger tragedy than to be given a life sentence ... solitary confinement at that.

There are millions of women like her all over India. We never hear of them. Nobody is interested in their grim stories. One does not have to leave the big cities to meet these ladies. Try talking to the house help - yes, the same

women who slave away in our homes and are beaten, raped, routinely brutalized in our high rises, by so-called educated and wealthy saabs and memsaabs. Their stories are equally poignant. The magic they have in their fingers is of a different kind - they uncomplainingly do our dirty work for us - clean our toilets, wash our clothes, scrub our utensils, swab the floors. They work those fingers to the bone. Often for a paltry sum, a handful of rice (if that).

Yet, we expect them to be smiling, obliging, tireless creatures whose only job is to ensure our lives are cleaner and more comfortable. We care nothing about them knowing how dispensable they are - one goes, three more show up. One dies, ten others take her place. India is busy spending countless crores of rupees on space research and sending moon missions. If even a fraction of that sum were to be spent on replicating the 'Sadhna' model, our society would benefit greatly on every level. What is that they say - to empower a woman is to empower a community.

I believe in magic - it will happen!

## IT'S ALL IN THE BAG!

*W*hat's with women and handbags? Oh ... billions!

One day I shall meet my dream woman, Mayawati, and the only thing I'd wish to discuss with her - you've guessed it - is handbags. Mayawati is India's official Bag Lady. And here's why: I think Hermes should exclusively design for and dedicate a bag to our pyaari Behan Mayawati. Birkins and Kellys don't quite cut it in India. Every B-grade starlet in Bollywood possesses several - fakes, of course. And socialites in droves parade their limited edition trophy bags along with the latest, not-so-limited toy boy. Agree, both make great eye candy. But think about the poor brand! It has taken Hermes a few decades to convince the world there's nothing quite as desirable as a Kelly or Birkin. But now that desi starlets, poppets and bimbettes have started flashing their acquisitions on Page 3, the bags are doomed!

This is where Mayawati comes in. Hermes should sign her up as a brand ambassador instantly. Forget those anorexic actresses with attitude. Signing Mayawati would be an absolute coup! An audacious and imaginative move that would make international headlines. Given all her statues (always but always with a handbag), the marketing opportunities are pretty impressive. Every great leader/dictator is associated with a symbol. Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi had his head gear. Che's (Argentinean Marxist revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara), beret remains a huge political-cum-fashion

statement. Gandhiji's round eye frames are considered cool. Anna Hazare appropriated the Mahatma's topi. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose preferred breeches. Rajiv Gandhi's trademark Gucci loafers are widely copied by young netas of today. Indira Gandhi's handloom one-offs are Sonia's legacy now. And Maya Memsaab's rexine handbags are so closely associated with her personality, I half-suspect she goes to bed with a handbag slung around her wrist.

Interestingly enough, I attended a high profile Halloween party last month - a soiree hosted by India's most applauded banker. Along with the witches and devils in scary gear, one couple really stood out. Our neighbour Pomi arrived with a garland of currency notes around her neck; her feet shod in heavy duty rubber chappals. She was, of course, carrying a hideous plastic handbag. Just in case people didn't get her attire, or understand her tribute to Mayawati that night, her husband Bharat was dressed as his wife's official bagman (dhoti, dark glasses, shoes and socks). He walked in dragging a large suitcase to stash the cash. That was not just a clever fancy dress, but an enormous statement that wasn't lost on the moneymen present! This sexy Mayawati really rocked the party.

That night itself, I made a few mental notes. Hermes has recently opened a suitably swishy flagship store in Mumbai (I have yet to visit ... but I'm not a Birkin babe). The more I thought about the Mayawati bag, the better sense it made! She has the numbers. And does she have the lolly! If even one hundredth of her followers buy her bag, that's one hell of a lot of money in the bank! I would love to own one myself! Why should I carry a bag inspired by Princess Grace Kelly of Monaco when I can support Maharani Mayawati of Uttar Pradesh?

Let's hope Mayawati does not dilute her impressive equity. It has to be Hermes or nothing! Mayawati is way bigger than Paris Hilton, who came to India to sell her handbags.

If Mayawati positions and markets herself strategically, she could become the Planet Earth's biggest Bag Lady. She has the potential to beat Imelda Marcos, whose staggering shoe collection became a talking point for the world. The Hermes representatives in India claim sales shot up after the famous 'Bagwati' spoof in Zoya Akhtar's multi-starrer blockbuster *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*. According to them, there is a long waiting list for an identical bag in the two India stores (the first one opened in Pune – which says something about Pune and its purchasing power).

If a Bollywood spoof and shrewd product placement could generate so much press (and instant sales), imagine the impact a Mayawati bag would have. And since timing is everything, it would make perfect sense to work on the launch immediately. The elections are round the corner. And the heat this generates in Uttar Pradesh can be capitalized on even as we speak. Mayawati is going to dominate our mind space in. She is a pretty powerful brand in her own right. Since India will be seeing a lot of this lady in the coming year, and we all know Mayawati and her bag can never be parted, Hermes should move ahead tout suite and ... well, bag her, before someone else does.

I have visualized the design in my head. It features the Taj Mahal (remember Mayawati's memorable Taj corridor plan?). The bag will have to be large enough to balance the lady's own proportions (this is important; all future statues will necessarily commemorate Mayawati's international rise to fame and glory). As a prime ministerial candidate, it is important to create a bag that reflects Mayawati's personality, which is awesome and daunting. By then she's bound to be on all the world's Rich Lists. Officially, at that. We can't have her carrying the wrong bag. Indian izzat ka sawal, hai.

How about it, Hermes?

## WHERE ARE ALL THE GOOD WOMEN?

Gosh! Didn't think it would come to this. Ever!

Some time back I read in a weekend supplement in which a bunch of really wimpy guys were moaning and groaning about the nasty, insulting manner in which women the world over keep asking that same, old tiresome question: 'Where are all the good men?'

The predictable response has always been: 'Don't you know, darling? They are either taken or gay.' Those poor fellows in the article sounded hopelessly defensive as they trotted out their many virtues, just in case women hadn't noticed! I felt rather sorry for them as I read on. The bottom line was simply this: 'Awww, come on, ladies! We could be worse.'

I thought to myself - what a dumb response. Look around you, guys. Where are the good women? Turn the question around instead of whining. It's true. And the reason for this phenomenon is also pretty obvious. More and more women are cloning male behaviour - the worst aspects of it, at that. With a rather depressing result that leaves us to cope with a society crammed with unattractive young people staring suspiciously at one another and going 'Ugggghh!'

Occasionally, I shamelessly eavesdrop on conversations at multiplexes, coffee shops, bars and other similar venues where young people gather to speak in loud voices. It's

pretty hard to tell the difference between the sexes. Both smoke and swear a lot. Both prefer jeans and tees (baseball caps are an option). They address one another as 'Dude' or 'Guy'. Both knock back drinks at about the same pace. Both get roaringly drunk. Both give jaunty high fives when jokes are swapped. And both discuss sex obsessively - who's having it, who isn't. Who had it last, how much and where. That is, when they aren't discussing money and possessions - who bought what, for how much and why.

Even the voices sound the same - the women's, much gruffer. The men's, pretty thin. It's all those cigarettes and other stronger substances, a teenager tells me casually, adding by way of a reassurance: 'Everybody is doing it... everybody is into it.' I am supposed to fill in the blanks and figure that one out. Scarily enough - I do!

While watching the hugely popular American comedy-drama television series called *Entourage* created by Doug Ellin or Tom Kapinos' multiple award-winning *Californication*, even I am shocked by the entirely out there representation of very nubile young girls who are perpetually on the make and ready to smoke, snort and have random sex with strangers. The dialogue is loaded with sexual references of the kinky kind, and kids across the world are hooked to the antics of Vincent and his friends - the infamous 'entourage' of the title.

In India too, our reality shows are pushing the envelope - just watch those frightening females cuss their way through episodes as the elimination rounds start heating up. Blame it on scary competition, but the lines between the sexes have blurred to such a degree, it no longer matters. That itself says a lot about a rapidly changing social order. I was looking at a fashion spread in a glossie, where a very sexy socialite was restyled in men's clothing. Her 'Boyfriend' in

jeans and tailored jackets did absolutely nothing for her. But she gamely went with the current flow.

Similarly, there were high profile male models wearing ghagras, make up and more jewellery than Jodha in Ashutosh Gowariker's 2008 film *Jodha Akbar*. Readers were told both these are going to be the hottest trends for the coming wedding season. In my mind, I was visualizing the 'suhaag raat' with both the bride and groom peeling off layers of clothing, make up and jewellery before jumping into bed.

The change I'm referring to is more than merely cosmetic. Nor do I see it as a passing trend. When young women lament they find it extraordinarily hard to meet suitable boys, I sympathise. But only up to a point. I see an equal number of miserable looking men by the bar, hanging on to their beers, staring disinterestedly at a clump of fierce looking females also hanging on to their pints. Zero chemistry! Neither group makes the first move. What's the point, they shrug. The women stare vacantly into space and ask - yup - you've guessed it: 'Where are all the good men?' Sadly, that's precisely what the men are also asking in reverse: 'Where are all the good women?'

Frankly, I am flummoxed!

You?

## MOTHERS-IN-LAW

*M*others-in-law have never had it this easy!

As of now, they can do no wrong. They can't be prosecuted in cases of dowry harassment, and pesky daughters-in-law lustng after their properties can take a long walk into the sunset, because the old biddy's home belongs to her and her alone – the bahu cannot claim it as a part of her inheritance. So there! All this is terrific news for the most misunderstood sub-category of women (moms-in-law) whose sons are married to far-from-docile brides. The older women can relax and rejoice at the thought the law is on their side finally.

But ... ab tera kya hoga, Ekta? Ms. Kapoor has made a fortune out of the misfortune suffered by doormat-wives battling it out with demonic mothers-in-law. In fact, this syndrome has become an entire industry in our society, giving a lot of pretty mild-mannered ladies of a certain vintage, a pretty terrible name. A few years back a Delhi court turned the tables on the bahus who cry she-wolf, and rush to cop stations with accusations of daily torture and dowry demands, instigated by the husband's wicked mother. The then metropolitan magistrate Devender Kumar Jangala declared no proceedings could be initiated against any female member of a family under the Domestic Violence Act. Stated Jangala: '... only an adult male who is or has been in a domestic relationship with the aggrieved person, can

be covered with the meaning of respondent.' The Supreme Court too has cautioned against the misuse of anti-dowry provisions to implicate innocent people for settling scores. There must be thousands of elderly ladies out there who are relieved by both judgments.

Undoubtedly, there will be an equal number of oppressed brides who have indeed suffered mental and physical abuse at the hands of their sadistic mothers-in-law, who will justifiably feel let down by these rulings. Ekta can't be all that off the mark in her depiction of modern day marriage. The success of her serials is proof enough that she has hit the right chords. If millions of people identify with what she is saying, it can only mean she is reflecting the truth – a very ugly truth.

For whatever reason, the equation between the two female protagonists in these tricky situations across several households in India remains uneasy at best. Today, armed with an education and better social awareness, the daughter-in-law is in a position to fight back, if she is indeed the victim. But there has also been a spate of controversial cases where the girl has made false and reckless accusations against a woman who may be innocent and a victim herself. After centuries of suffering at the hands of tyrannical in-laws, young wives have discovered a weapon to defend themselves ... but also to unfairly attack. The saas-bahu relationship continues to be the defining one in deciding the fate of a marriage. Now, armed with a more progressive approach, perhaps some balance will be restored in resolving touchy marital issues.

What is a 'shared household' and where does that leave the two women who share it - the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law? Justice J.H. Bhatia of the Bombay High Court held that: 'A daughter-in-law can claim a right of residence only in a house owned by her husband.' In other

words, if the house belongs to the mother-in-law, she cannot be pushed out of it by her son and his wife. This was with reference to an interesting case in which a 70-year-old widow was being bullied and threatened by her about-to-be divorced daughter-in-law, who had filed several charges against her. Justice Bhatia made it amply clear that the daughter-in-law has no rights over mom-in-law's assets.

While all these legal moves and initiatives are worth applauding, most times the reality of the situation overrides legalese. What can a 70-year-old woman do if goondas enter her home and beat her black and blue in the dead of the night? Can she tell them to bugger off since the law is on her side? Hell no. If she survives the attack, she might continue the fight ... till another attack takes place. In such a grim scenario, legislation is nothing more than a worthless piece of paper. Knowing one's rights is one thing, enforcing them, quite another!

Unless there are radical changes within society at large, Ekta Kapoor has nothing to fear - the saas-bahu sagas will carry on ... and on ... and on.

## WOMEN OVER 40

Kathleen Turner has always been one of my Hollywood heroes; she's a large lady with a huge attitude. That's the good news. I read a recent interview in which she dissed the media for stereotyping women of a certain vintage, which in her case, is an understandable grouse.

Turner was a real head turner, even at 40-plus, when she stripped on stage for the infamous role of Mrs. Robinson in the April 2000 production of *The Graduate* staged at the Gielgud Theatre in London. This was considered an immensely brave thing to do for an actress who was no longer at her nubile best. The thinking being, it's fine for a 20-something to flaunt her perfect curves at the Westend, but my word, it takes some guts for a middle-aged female to do the full monty with a less than perfect body!

Diane Keaton faced the same reaction when she stripped in *Something's Gotta Give* in the 2003 film directed by Nancy Meyers and co-starring Jack Nicholson. I remember watching it with my young daughter, who was horrified and repulsed by the idea of a senior citizen going frontal. There was horror in her voice when she asked me whether it was 'normal' for old people to experience lust. Without her realizing it, my daughter had also bought into the sexist/ageist trap! And as her mother, it was hard for me to deconstruct those complex emotions without putting her off totally.

Personally, I had watched the Diane Keaton scene with enormous admiration. And a great deal of tenderness. How tough it is for women to come to terms with fading beauty and sagging breasts. How much tougher to share that depressing fact with millions of strangers worldwide, as the camera rolls and the woman reveals herself in the cruel light of critical judgment.

So many centuries later, has anything changed? International Women's Days come and go. Token 'Achievers' show up to be felicitated by assorted organizations offering meaningless awards that are sponsored by fat cat advertisers. I'm sure Turner and Keaton have had their share of accolades and trophies, too. But then, Turner sounded bitter and disillusioned. She finished her memoir with a telling title - *Send Yourself Roses: Thoughts on my Life, Love, and Leading Roles*. She was also dealing with rheumatism, had walked out of her 20-year-old marriage, and was looking for work. Not the happiest story. The medication she was on did not help the cause - Turner's face looked puffy and her body, bloated. She was then in her mid-fifties and realistic enough to know there weren't too many roles in Hollywood for women who fit that profile. I guess, not too many invites came her way to preside over International Women's Day events, either. Even there, the preference is for younger, hotter, better looking women - and never mind their 'achievements'. I felt sad reading her feisty interview, for she spoke the truth. Women do become invisible after a certain age - even Hollywood stars.

Look at the fate of our own former screen goddesses. And as I go through the lists of Indian women being celebrated on 8 March (International Women's Day), I realize how the names on those lists exclusively belong to younger and younger women with not much to show by way of real achievement (television starlets, models, beauty

queens, VJs). They are being feted for all the wrong reasons and by all the wrong people!

How come nobody thought of giving an award to that great singer of yesteryears Mubarak Begum? Because, she was too old to add the all-important glam quotient to such evenings. She was not telegenic anymore, nor could she give saucy sound bytes to mediawallas. In fact, nobody knows or cares who she is! Least of all the audience for such televised charades. Alas, there is no room in the world for women who have passed their 'sell by' dates. It's too late for Mubarak Begum to get herself botoxed for the cameras. Just as it is too late for Turner to have a face lift. Or a boob job. Nobody wants to pay good money to look at (or even hear) women who are past their prime.

The performing arts are exceptionally harsh towards ageing divas. Which is why Elizabeth Taylor looked so very tragic as she sat in her wheelchair flaunting a new 'fiance', who was to become the lady's ninth husband. But guess what? A 90-year-old billionaire acquiring a 30-year-old former lap dancer as a wife is not laughed at by anyone except his bankers. It's a win-win situation for him. And for her? Well ... it's a better deal than being Kathleen Turner. Unless, of course, her husband falls for a 20-year-old, and dumps her overnight.

International, Women's Day? Bah! You can keep it.

## WHY WE LOVE MARY KOM ...

*W*hen a hugely successful woman's husband declares to the press that his wife is 'too good to be true,' it actually says much more about the man than the lady he is referring to.

By now, all of India has fallen in love with Mary Kom. Her proud husband Onler Kom, will just have to get used to it. After all, Onler married a world champion. She had two mighty titles in her kitty in 2005, when Onler popped the question. That didn't change a thing, for he says he married 'an angel'. As a sportsperson (footballer) himself, perhaps Onler understood his wife's grit and determination to excel in her chosen field. Not only did he keep his own sporting ambitions on hold, he sensibly decided to become Mary's manager and mentor. He has spoken about his decision in several candid interviews since Mary's ascension.

Today, his wife is India's number one darling. After winning her bronze medal at the London Olympics, Mary's regulated and uncomplicated life has undergone several, rather dramatic changes. Apart from being a national sports' hero, she is a much admired youth icon and role model, drawing crowds of admirers wherever she goes. Check out the standing ovation she received at Shabana Azmi's Bollywood fashion show for charity where Mary shared the ramp with the likes of Priyanka Chopra, and walked away as the biggest star of them all!

Someone who was present that night explained why Mary stole the show despite the stellar line up of Bollywood biggies on the catwalk. 'She was so herself, so natural ... her simplicity scored over all those preening divas batting their fake eyelashes.' Aha - that was the secret -- simplicity. In as high profile an existence that Mary will be a part of henceforth, she will need to tap into that very simplicity to stay grounded. To stay happy.

So far, none of the attention or adulation has gone to Mary's head. She comes across as a delighted child playing with new baubles. Those 'baubles' happen to be medals, trophies and global accolades. Whether Mary subjects herself to a fashion makeover and graces the covers of glossies, from what her husband says about her, it would appear as if Mary remains untouched by the overnight glamour and glitz that is swamping her right now. She herself says she is happiest strumming the guitar and singing for Onler, cooking pork and rice for the family, and playing with her five-year-old twins. As a woman from Manipur, Mary insists she has faced no discrimination, despite belonging to a patriarchal society. Women across India, and possibly the world, are cheering for this spunky individual who to this day, cooks, cleans and looks after her kids without a trace of self-consciousness. Compare her matter-of-fact attitude to the one displayed by other successful women who foolishly look down on what they call 'house work'. That Mary's husband has opted to take on several domestic responsibilities without making a song-and-dance out of the decision, is to his credit.

How it to all goes from this point on is going to be critical. Mary is on a roll right now. She will get endorsement deals galore. A movie is being planned on her extraordinary life. There will be countless invitations to travel and address international conferences. Celebrity is a seductive addiction. Mary has gone seamlessly from being an athlete of renown,

a genuine achiever, to a Very Famous Person. Apart from several national honours and awards that will inevitably come her way, her life will be overtaken by the accoutrements of fame - the wardrobe that goes with being a recognized person, the paparazzi shots each time she steps out, the high profile public appearances ... the barrage of requests to participate in reality shows on television ....

Yes, it's all happening to our Simple Mary from Manipur. Will this adulation go to her sensible head? Will she be co-opted into the tinsel world of flashbulbs and photo shoots? How will it affect her life with Onler and the twins, one of whom has undergone heart surgery? The thing about this kind of fame (as opposed to the one she has enjoyed all along), is the superficiality of it all. Mary Kom is the flavor of the day - everybody wants a piece of Mary. But what is it that Mary wants? For herself? Her family? Her future? 'She has been a giver all her life,' Onler was quoted as saying: 'Once a giver, always a giver'.

But shall we also reserve a medal for Mary's wonderful husband, Onler? It is because he gave, so that Mary could achieve her dream. He deserves our congratulations, too.

## WOMEN AND WHEELS ...

I don't drive. Cars, I mean. It is simply not an aptitude I possess.

Fortunately, this appalling inadequacy was discovered pretty early in life. But at an enormous cost. Not just in monetary terms, but emotional ones as well. I totaled a car that did not belong to me. It didn't belong to the young man who had been besotted and reckless enough to allow me behind the wheel. It was his father's company car. How he explained the axle breaking into two, is something I never did find out. We broke up at the site of the accident itself. I managed to wreck a couple of other cars ... and hearts. But we shan't go into that here. The price has been paid. Many times over. It was a hard and expensive lesson to learn. But I was sensible enough to back off while I was still ahead. And lives had not been lost.

This sounds like an insanely sexist remark to be making, but I do believe gals should think a hundred times before taking the plunge and hitting the accelerator. During the past few months, there have been some really nasty accidents in and around Mumbai. Most of them involved women. And most of the women were inebriated at the time of the crash. Some of the gory details from police records suggest that the fast cars these ladies were driving belonged to their richie rich dads and were birthday gifts.

One of the accused has just been given a five-year jail term. Her shocked dad died of a stroke a few months after the drunken daughter's picture had hit the headlines after the accident which claimed the life of a young cop. Today, the girl is pleading with the judge to reduce her sentence, even as the cop's widow is insisting five years behind bars is far too lenient a punishment for such a heinous crime. This is but one such case. And it attracted more attention than some of the others because the rather fetching young woman is known in Mumbai's social circles.

Three out of four of my daughters possess a driving license and insist they are skilled, calm and in control behind the wheel. I am the nervous wreck, they mock, as we pull out of the parking lot, and I start issuing instant instructions. They promptly plug their ears with headphones and start listening to favourite tracks on the iPod. Grrrrr. Meanwhile, I hang on to my seat, as the car takes off and flies over the innumerable speed breakers at top speed, like those cemented obstacles don't exist. Generally, the girls are smiling to themselves, lost in song, as pedestrians leap nimbly out of the path of the killer car. This has been going on for a while. Their father is not pleased. He wants me to 'stop this nonsense'. I plead helplessness. It's a mess.

I tried talking to the girls about the way female brains are wired. I mentioned foolish stuff, provided statistics which talk about the left side, right side of female brains, and which side controls what. Driving skills are thrown in to this argument. I shamelessly fib as we negotiate a sharp and abrupt turn that nobody noticed till we took it. My heart lurches into my mouth. The daughter at the wheel grins and asks: 'Isn't Adele just too cool?'

My superb research has convinced me that most women should leave cars alone. Of course, this is a nasty theory, based on nothing more than personal experience.

Psychiatrists would label it as a direct result of an unresolved trauma, at an impressionable, vulnerable time of my life. They'd be one hundred per cent right. But, thanks to that trauma, I am alive. More importantly, so are other, innocent people. Angry women drivers tell me I am perpetuating a stereotype and falling into a male trap. Men are possessive about their cars and other modes of transport. They are even possessive about their wives' and girlfriends' cars.

Men feel proprietorial about machines. Let them keep the bloody machines, is what I say? Why waste our time behind the wheel when we could be doing other stuff? Stuff that doesn't endanger life, our own included? So far, I haven't succeeded in convincing anybody. Not even my daughters. The last time one of them offered to drive me somewhere, she helpfully gave me a cheerful T-shirt that read 'Tension mat le, yaar.' I huffed, 'I am not your yaar; I am your mother.' She was already in fourth gear ... and we hadn't left the garage!

## LOVE AND SELF-LOATHING ...

A few weeks ago, I was talking to dinner companions at a lively soiree hosted by a public intellectual.

As is the case these days, our conversation kept coming back to the death of the 23-year-old rape victim in Delhi. The erudite husband of a beautiful lady seated at the table, wondered aloud as to what is worse - an acid attack or rape? I was startled by the comment and asked him to elaborate. He said with complete sincerity: 'An acid attack is far worse for a woman since it disfigures her.' Still startled, but not wishing to appear rude, I requested him to clarify further. He answered thoughtfully: 'A rape victim can walk down the street confidently, and nobody will know she has been raped. But what can the poor acid attack victim do? Her scars are there for the world to observe.'

Later the same night, I couldn't get the conversation out of my head. Imagine the 'choices' we as women have - acid *vs* rape. One, visible. The other, not. Both violent. In a bizarre context, which is the bigger trauma? If a woman is given such a sadistic choice by an oppressor ... would she be in a position to select? 'Please, Sirji ... go ahead and rape me. But ... but ... hold the acid!' Has it really come to that? Are visible scars far more painful than internal ones? Or is it back to the same old problem faced by women down the centuries: 'Never mind what happens to me behind four

walls. Beat me, rape me, throttle me, gag me - but don't leave any evidence behind. For, if you do, the shame of that revelation will be far harder to live with than the lifelong sorrow of the body having been sexually violated.'

A woman is an expert at keeping countless secrets. Some of these dark secrets haunt her till she dies. Sexual abuse, often by close family members, is one of them. She is expected to stay mum, or face the wrath of her family and the samaaj at large. She becomes a sullied creature. No better than used merchandise. Her family conspires to pass on the tainted woman to an unsuspecting groom. In all this, nobody bothers to find out what hell the victim herself is going through. Having spoken to several women trapped in such appalling circumstances, I can tell you, there is just one pre-dominant emotion: self-loathing. A woman who has been brutalized physically by a man, is further brutalized emotionally, generally by her own self.

This is how it has always been. Female guilt is rarely understood. It is somehow not particularly 'important' to anybody. People scoff: 'Oh ... you women are such whingers! Stop going on and on about your bloody guilt. Or deal with it yourself.' Quite forgetting the larger question: Why should the victim feel guilty in the first place?

We are conditioned to accept 'our position' in the overall scheme of things. If a woman dares to defy that assigned position, she is branded a trouble maker ... dangerous to society. She has to be suitably punished. This punishment takes several forms - some are so subtle as to be more lethal than even a harsh beating. When a woman begins to hate herself, it is the equivalent of a slow and painful death. Day by day, she dies a little. If her family notices and does nothing about it, she herself accelerates the process. Often, she ends up taking her own life. The family is relieved. It is considered the honourable thing to do. At the back of

their minds is the sneaking suspicion that she had it coming. That she had asked for it. That she deserved to die. Rape victims are judged and condemned far more than the dastardly perpetrators of the crime. ‘Why me?’ the victim keeps wondering. And the answer she receives says it all: ‘You obviously invited it. You must have provoked the man.’

Nirbhaya’s case is different. There were not just six penises involved. There was also the killer iron rod. It was not just rape. It is murder. And what has horrified people across the country is that ghastly detail involving her intestines being pulled out. As any student of basic biology will tell you, one cannot pull out intestines from a woman’s vagina. Let’s leave this sordid story here. It fills one with such deep anguish that Nirbhaya’s excruciating pain during her courageous struggle becomes ones own.

Who deserves the Bharat Ratna in 2013? There’s no contest. It has to be Nirbhaya.

## WOMEN UNDER ASSAULT

*R*by now we have trained ourselves to shrug and take it in our stride. What choice is there?

I am talking about the stepped up violence against women in our major cities. This is happening on a daily basis. Women are getting hammered, assaulted, clobbered, stoned, belted, whipped, chained, smothered, gagged, slashed, stabbed, maimed, raped, bludgeoned, burnt, stripped ... how many more descriptions does one need? Why is this happening? At such an exaggerated, accelerated pace? Any answers?

Well, here's a theory. Women were once entirely dispensable. One or two dead, here and there, didn't matter. Nobody counted. Nobody cared. And we aren't even talking villages right now. City women were considered useful, up to a point ... but also replaceable. Our metros were full of recycled women who were expected to play their bit parts and then melt into the sunset. If, for any reason that did not happen, and the women rewrote the script, they were disposed off efficiently and quickly. Their disappearance was barely noticed. Which was also understandable - given that there were dozens of others ready to take their place. Assembly line women - our big towns were crammed with them. That part hasn't changed. But one thing definitely has - today's urban female is fighting back as best as she can,

with the one weapon she now possesses - her own money. She is earning well.

But here's the paradox - her pay check, which should have protected her, has become the noose around her neck. Men are finding it exceedingly hard to like this person. They like what she brings to the party (money!). They like the fact that she pays her own bills (Oh, yes!). They like not having to subsidise dates (Amazing!). But they still don't like her! She makes them feel redundant. Even worse, she makes them resentful. They ask themselves: 'Is the bitch going to take away our jobs? Will the boss fall for her wiles and promote her out of turn? Will she outsmart us yet again at that important conference?' Unable to deal with this new 'threat', they do what any cornered animal does - they snarl and bite!

Am I over dramatizing the situation? Maybe a little. But I have seen naked hostility in the eyes of several men as they observe female colleagues working hard and managing several other areas of their lives without fuss. There is unmistakable envy written all over their faces. Sometimes, that envy refuses to go away. It begins to eat up the most insecure of those men. They start imagining things ... that the woman who has done brilliantly during the sales' conference, is out to grab what rightfully belongs to them - the men. A feeling of persecution sets in. Every woman is seen as a predatory, aggressive creature. She has to be tamed. She has to be fixed. She has to be taught a lesson. If she fights back, or displays attitude, her 'punishment' has to be more severe. If she apologizes for her wayward ways and promises to behave herself ... then maybe, they can work on a more acceptable solution to the 'problem'. The problem being gender!

It is only going to get worse.

If that sounds alarmist, so be it. The genie is out of the bottle. The she-elephant is very much in the room. And she isn't going anywhere. As for those coveted jobs, given the tattered state of most economies, the scramble to grab whatever is going will get still more aggressive. Shrinking jobs across the globe mean heightened levels of frustration. Everybody is fighting for that single piece of juicy bone. More and more women are managing to reach it first.

Men are not at all happy about this development. Their anger and rage find avenues that are frequently volatile enough to lead to random attacks on the first woman who crosses their path. Any excuse will do - her skirt's too short. Her breasts too large. She's smiling more than required. She seems HAPPY! That's the bloody limit. First, she takes away our jobs. Now she invades our space (what business does she have enjoying a drink at a bar?). At the rate she is going, soon she'll tell us what to do. Who wants to take orders from a woman? Why can't she stick to her place? Go back to being obedient and duty bound? If she hasn't got the message so far, it's time she was taught a lesson.

And that's pretty much the way it is. Men will protest and say this is utter rubbish. But there is really no other explanation. Men react when their pockets hurt. Right now, their pockets are hurting. And their heads are exploding with anger. So, what do we do? Reaching their hearts is the obvious answer. Even the most demonic of men have hearts. As always the onus is on women - find a solution. Or perish.

## WILL YOU BE MY VALENTINE, PRAMOD MUTHALIK?

*C*ome on, Pramodji. Be a sport.

I can't think of a better candidate to send a Valentine to. I love you. So do all the women of India. Sach-much.

We find you seriously cute. A real hottie. The thinking woman's sex symbol. Aapke saamne Farhan Akhtar kuch nahi. You should be flattered. Are you going to arrest me for declaring my feelings in public? No problem. Pyar kiya to darna kya? You are cho chweet. So cute. Today being Valentine's Day, and you being my Chosen One, I'm going to the nearest pub to drink a pint or two of beer in your honour. Theek hai?

I suspect Pramod Muthalik will drown in a pink panties deluge today, and his inbox will overflow with lovey doveey messages sent by the women from across the country. He may even receive pyaar ki jhappies if he ventures out, and who knows, if he runs into Renuka Chwudhury somewhere, she may clasp him to her ample bosom and plant a kiss. Isko kehtey hain, Luck by Chance.

Pramod, you are one sexy dude - single and ready to mingle. And whether you like it or not, women are going to chase you ... invite you for a drink at the nearest pub, maybe get you to shake a leg. Don't knock it till you've tried it. Confess: when was the last time you went on a date? Held hands? Romanced a lady? Never? Toba. You don't know what you are missing. I think Nisha Susan is the right person

to have as your special date on this very special day. Check out a few bars and pubs with her and see for yourself what exactly goes on there. It may surprise you.

'The Pink Chaddi' campaign kicked off by Susan has snowballed into something major. It started as a personal protest, a strong reaction to the abominable conduct of Muthalik's Sri Ram Sena activists. But it rapidly gained momentum as women across the board decided to display their utter contempt for these men by mocking them like never before. What better weapon than women's underwear to register a lack of respect for men like Muthalik who are fixated on precisely that garment - even if they'll never admit as much? These are the sickos of our society. Men arrogant enough to believe they are the guardians of our chastity. Go to hell, you guys. Handle your own hang ups, your frustrations, your insecurities and leave us alone to figure out what we want to do with our time and leisure.

Those days are gone, when the Gehlots and Muthaliks of the world could dictate the agenda for women. Or issue diktats. Our enlightened Home minister (God bless P. Chidambaram's kind heart), has stated in clear and precise language that he considers Muthalik's Sri Ram Sena a 'threat' to the country. By articulating that the Sri Ram Sena has 'crossed limits', Chidambaram has earned an extra Valentine from me and - thousands like me - women who were waiting for 'real men' to put these borderline, iffy fellows into their rightful place - the nearest dustbin.

I am not a pub-goer, nor do I drink beer. That hardly matters. Whether or not I subscribe to the 'pub culture' is also irrelevant. Who the hell is Muthalik to sit in judgement over ladies who enjoy such activities? It is entirely their prerogative, their money, their desire, their decision. Mangalore is not Kabul. And unlike Afghanistan, women in India cannot be so easily browbeaten by such bully boys. If these men were

sincere about ‘protecting’ women, they would be addressing far more serious issues, like domestic violence, rape, female foeticide. Why waste time harassing a minuscule number of urban women who form a .000-something of our population? Why accost carefree teenagers with bangles and sindhoor and force them to marry? Why not intervene and help underprivileged women in distress over dowry issues? What’s more important - bride-burning or hand-holding? What skewered priorities are these?

Ever since ‘The Consortium of Pubgoing, Loose and Forward Women,’ was formed a couple of years ago, the site caught fire, as men and women signed up to express their solidarity and cock a snook at the Sri Ram Sena. I responded instantly to the email and shared it with several girlfriends across the world. Now I can proudly declare myself a card-holding (or should that be ‘panties-holding’?) member of the association. The response has been overwhelming. It is like a cultural marathon being launched, with the best runners taking the lead against tyranny. The Home minister of Karnataka, has also become the absolute darling of the pink panties donors – he’d better have an explanation ready for his family before the courier chap arrives bearing a bulky carton stuffed with frilly, lacey, risqué lingerie.

This unique form of protest has found several takers for an obvious reason. It is a simple, inexpensive yet potent way of making a point. Some may dub it childish and attention-seeking. But in my view, it is the ultimate insult. Men who get their perverse kicks by humiliating women sexually, deserve nothing more ‘serious’ than this gift. Molesters are perverts who obviously do not possess a legitimate avenue to satisfy their sexual needs.

The only way they can touch a female, get anywhere close to forbidden fruit, is by attacking her under the guise of guarding her morality. Ha!

The National Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra took a twisted lead by distributing Valentine's Day cards in Thane, a Shiv Sena stronghold. Politicising this harmless day, reserved for Cupid and his arrow, is another way to attract youth votes. Since all is fair in love and war, no issues with the strategy. Perhaps Shiv Sainiks themselves have had a change of heart and won't vandalize gift shops and restaurants celebrating Valentine's Day. Bharatiya sanskriti faces zero danger from an exchange of dil-shaped greetings and other romantic expressions of love. Think of Lord Krishna and his gopis. How chilled out were they? Our Great Indian Culture is alive and well. No worries. The real threat to it does not come from mini-skirted women knocking back a couple of beers, nor from young lovers walking hand in hand through malls. It comes from goons who assault defenceless females, demand marriage certificates from amorous couples, and threaten to marry off those found 'guilty' of a crime called romance.

What shall we call this? How about 'Emoshanal Atyachar'?

## HAVE GUN. WILL RAPE.

*(A)*nother death. Several more rapes. A few arrests. Public outrage for a couple of weeks. And then? Nothing.

A 22 year-old-girl in Delhi has been shot dead. Her crime? She resisted the sexual advances of two drunks who were trying to bully her into getting on to their bike. Pooja, the victim, who died instantly after three bullets were pumped into her, was with her husband at a bus stop in South East Delhi. A police post was just one hundred metres from the spot where she was gunned down. Forget the various and varying versions of what happened. It is why it happened in the first place that should concern us the most. On 8th March each year, women across the world celebrate ‘their day’ (International Women’s Day). There are the usual seminars, workshops, speeches, rallies ... not to forget countless merchandising opportunities. Women are urged to ‘pamper themselves’, luxury spas offer attractive discounts, swishy restaurants host ‘women only’ parties. The usual sham of ‘rejoicing’ our sex will temporarily numb us from paying the slightest attention to ground realities that are shouting out an entirely different story. We will raise champagne toasts to better tomorrows, dance with other women, sing along with ‘I Will Survive’, and generally delude ourselves that we are on top of our lives!

Tiredly, almost resignedly, I am telling myself this year that there’s nothing wrong with a bit of self-delusion.

Perhaps it can even be termed therapeutic. We need a safety valve ... some fake pampering to distract ourselves from the grimness all around. For that one day, why not live in a fool's paradise, have an extra glass of wine, wear red lipstick, high heels, a risqué outfit and feel alive? For who knows what may happen next as we leave the party? There could be a bullet, rope, lathi, knife waiting for us as we weave our way to the parking lot, bus stop, train station, autorik stand. Why not kick up our heels and continue dancing as long as the music does not stop?

There are no safety nets left any longer. Every female person is vulnerable. Yes, even that infant, and the three-year-old girl playing near the footpath. It doesn't matter what we wear, how old we are, what shape we are in, or how we conduct ourselves. Nobody is looking at any of these details. To be born with a vagina is provocation enough. Rape happens. Rape will happen. Rape has always happened. And society has looked the other way. To think harsher punishments meted out to rapists will make life more tolerable for women is yet another modern myth. The man who shot Pooja could not possibly have been unaware of Nirbhaya's case, or what will be the fate of her jailed rapists. Did that stop Munshiram, Pooja's killer from Bihar, from attacking her?

While we pursue the Pooja case (so long as public interest lasts), there will be the standard television panel discussions, which will inevitably get polarized around political lines. Sheila Dixit will remain aloof and self-righteous as she blames the Delhi cops. The cops will look for alibis and blame the system. The girl's family will be hounded by hacks thrusting cameras into their faces and asking intrusive questions. Pooja will join the ranks of hundreds of young victims like herself, who have paid with their lives for having the gumption to offer resistance when faced with murderous molesters.

We made a film about Jessica Lal. There will be films about Nirbhaya, too. Pooja will probably be forgotten in another month or so. More rapes, more deaths in Delhi will displace Pooja. Our horror and sorrow will also fade as it is not possible to live in a permanent state of shock and anger. This is exactly what the authorities hope for. They know the short life of public outrage. That is what protects them in the long run. We will fret and frown over our taxes and diesel prices. Rising costs will dwarf rising rape figures. In our own mundane struggle to hang in there and carry on, one more dead woman will be reduced to a tiny cipher. And Munishram will cool his heels in a prison for a few years before getting bail ... and reaching for his gun once again.

Oscar Pistorius has many brothers across the globe.

## BLOGGERS' STOP

I met a delightful young woman the other day and was amused to hear her stories about the blog she has started recently, which is really out there in every sense of the word.

Unfortunately, she had to change the name (it included a four-letter word which refers to an intimate part of a woman's anatomy), since several organizations were banning it, and fire-walling her efforts was defeating the *raison d'être* behind launching the blog. She smartly switched the name to something far more innocuous-sounding.

But the content remained as in-your-face as ever. So, what was all the fuss about? As she put it succinctly: 'Sex!' Since she had decided to talk about her own sexuality in an entirely candid fashion, most of the responses had to do with talking dirty to her. As she put it: 'Men wanted me to be still more explicit. And if I didn't oblige, they'd shower a stream of filthy abuses.' The debate that followed provided an insight into the so-called 'new morality' we keep discussing *ad nauseum*. True, women are far more open today when it comes to articulating their feelings *vis-à-vis* their bodies. But are men equally willing to hear these freed voices? Do old taboos still dominate our consciousness or have we relaxed rigid mores sufficiently to accommodate a woman's desires - stated, secret or otherwise?

Blogging is about self expression. And freedom. It must be immensely gratifying to have one's say sans any

restrictions. Especially, in as repressed a society as ours. I believe a blogger has to be in constant communication with those who want a response. I really don't know how an Aamir Khan or an Amitabh Bachchan does it, given their frenetic schedules, but the fact they are 'contactable' by ornery folks, is in itself a big move. Hollywood biggies hire professionals to keep updating their blogs. It is a full time job in itself. But here in India, celebs are expected to be in direct touch with fans who want to bond on their blogs.

What happens to those who do not get a response? Do they sulk? Accuse? Abuse? All three? I asked the attractive blogger how she dealt with the issue. How often did she write fresh stuff? Was it always about sex? She laughed and said she did explore other terrains as well, but mainly she discussed modern attitudes to dating. Drunken dates were high on her list of no-nos. However, as a single woman, she didn't restrict her writing to just ranting about personal issues. As a concerned citizen she wanted her blog to address more serious problems confronting our society - child abuse, rape and sex crimes of all hues and definitions. Her blog was successfully reaching out to women in distress who were writing in with horrifying stories of marital violence, among other ghastly incidents that society often turns a blind eye to. And yes, she updated the material thrice a week.

Was the blog yet another cathartic/therapeutic self indulgence, or something much more? Is there a small but significant revolution taking place in the female domain, beyond the judgemental eyes of disapproving zealots? My newly acquired blogger-friend was pretty clear about her mission. She loved blogging, and she believed it served a definite social purpose. Through her frequent updates she not only succeeded in clearing the cobwebs in her own head, but also provided a liberal platform to men and women who wanted to share their thoughts on life, love and lust.

Her day job was more mundane, but kept her plugged into the here-and-now. Plus, it paid her bills. Her edgy defiance and strident assertions apart, I saw her as a representative of today's 'everywoman'. Slightly confused, but wanting more than ever to have her voice heard. If nobody else is willing to listen, that's okay. She has her blog. And the blog is beginning to get an impressive number of hits. Some of them are yucky ('Your blog sucks. Do you?'), others reassuring. She ain't complaining. She is using her space to reach out, without having to bother about reactions. She is doing so bravely and boldly - not for her the anonymous route (strictly no names). 'This is ME!' she states simply. Take it or leave it. More and more fans are taking it ... and begging for more.

Perhaps the blog's growing popularity will give her the guts to go back to its original name. And just in case you are wondering what that four letter word is, let me just say it starts with a 'c', but it isn't the one you are thinking about!

Go figure ...

## SCARRED FOR LIFE

Two years back I was in South Africa – no, not to see our ‘Boys’ getting their asses whipped on the cricket field – but to participate in a literary festival evocatively titled ‘Words on Water’.

It was during one of the panel discussions in Capetown that I got talking to another writer who specializes in crime fiction. Since this lady is meticulous about research, she spends considerable time with the local police and at the morgue. Morbid, but essential, given her chosen genre. Her father is a leading pediatric surgeon. And here’s the connection. Talking about crime in her country, one of the most violent societies on earth, the writer mentioned grisly aspects of her findings. Between seven or eight little girls are raped and murdered every week (a conservative estimate). I must have looked incredulous for she said: ‘Open the papers and you will see for yourself’.

I opened. And saw.

This is where her father comes in. The writer continued: ‘Most of the surgeries he performs are cosmetic reconstructions of the vagina. The little girls who survive gang rape are brought to the hospital with their private parts in tatters, bleeding profusely and semi-conscious. Their parents want them to be “fixed up” so as to protect the family name and not spoil their chances in the marriage market. Often, the girls are so badly mutilated it takes multiple surgeries to

restore their bodies. It is a gruesome task. But someone's got to do it.' She also talked about the mortuary in Capetown which is filled with bodies of unclaimed rape victims - their families don't want these 'disgraced' daughters, so they continue to lie there on rapidly melting ice, till some clerk decides to dispose them off.

I was so disturbed by her graphic description of the vulnerability of these tender young lives, I decided to skip all the post-reading festivities and look for answers to this blight from other sources. Speaking to government officials led me nowhere. Government officials the world over are just the same - they specialize in evasive responses. Mothers I met had just one reaction - make sure girls are never ever left alone.

Another young and attractive writer confessed how terrifying it was to engage in as innocuous an activity as browsing in a bookstore only to have burly men coming up to say: 'So ... are you alone?' She has been attacked but escaped rape due to timely intervention. These days, she makes sure she is escorted at all times. Mridul Kumar, our consul, mentioned how his young wife and daughters, used to an early morning jog in previous postings, were confined to the house in Capetown, despite having an ex-cop as a chauffeur-cum-bodyguard. Most residents make sure to get home before sundown, and remain barricaded inside their homes with the alarm systems switched on. This is no way to live!

What is wrong with South African society that such acts of brutality and violence have become a part of daily life? Where little girls are routinely raped by gangs of well-built men? Nobody can quite explain this nasty phenomenon. Rape exists in every society and culture. But targeting and raping a disproportionately large number of female children seems to be a South African speciality. What a shameful and fiendish trait.

Castration of rapists has been suggested as a deterrent recently. So has the death penalty for child rapists. But right here in Delhi, we have an equally ghoulish crime, involving the rape and death of several little girls by a man who is busy defending himself, even though the available evidence pins him as being guilty (along with his servant Surendra Koli). Moninder Singh Pandher may still get away with it, given our perverse laws (the Aarushi murder is a case in point). Who knows how many more such deviants and sexual perverts lurk in our midst, undetected and unafraid? This sickness cannot be ignored since it tells a far bigger story about the overall ill health of societies across the globe.

Those violated little girls in South Africa may have their torn vaginas surgically restored, but who will fix up their tattered souls?

## DUSKY AND LOVELY

*T*rust film star Sushmita Sen to keep bending rules and new ground.

When she hosted her very first Miss Universe (India) beauty pageant aptly titled 'I Am She,' in May 2010, I was happy to support her and get on to the jury. Part of the process involved a one-on-one with the contestants on the morning of the show. This is generally the most tedious part of judging beauty pageants, since the contestants (I am sorry to say this) aren't exactly in Einstein's league. Each judge is given three minutes per girl, and that is often two minutes too many. Not this time.

The contestants were brainy, ambitious and educated. If that came as a really pleasant surprise, think about this: most of them were decidedly dusky. Unashamedly so. I have judged countless beauty contests to know that even five years ago a dark complexioned girl wouldn't have stood a chance in hell of making it past the first round. Regardless of all else (a hot bod, great attitude, charm, intelligence, height), any girl who didn't automatically fall into the fair and lovely (think Aishwarya Rai Bachchan) category would have been instantly disqualified.

Something has clearly changed. And I was delighted when one of the finalists declared from the stage that she was proud of her dusky skin. She received the loudest cheers even if she didn't win the coveted crown. But Ushkoshi, the

girl from Kolkata who effortlessly walked away with the sash (and the evening), also fell into the exotic category - she, with her glowing café au lait skin tone and well tanned legs! With her springy hair, ready smile and sunny quotes, she was an obvious winner. Perhaps Shah Rukh Khan sensed that too when he lavished extra attention on her during an informal tete-a-tete on stage with the final five contestants.

Another amazing coincidence: *four* of the five finalists glowing on the stage that night were dusky and gorgeous. The few light skinned, light eyed ones had not made the final cut. That they will probably gravitate towards Bollywood and take a crack at the glam world, is a given. But during the interview sessions most of them spoke about career options that had little or nothing to do with showbiz. The stories that appealed to me the most involved small town girls who had struggled against unbelievable odds to get here.

One had lost her father to cancer when she, the eldest of three children, was 17 years old. With an uneducated mother and two younger siblings to take care of, she had a gigantic responsibility on her head when she assumed the role of the head of the family. She looked for employment - any employment - and got down to work. Today, her brother is an engineer, and sister, an architect. Thanks to her.

Another young girl from an obviously disadvantaged background was wearing borrowed feathers for the contest, given to her by a generous dress designer from Pune. But she didn't let that get her down - her confidence levels were impressive and she managed to make it to the top ten. Yes, even in that unflattering, ill fitting loaned outfit.

What will happen to this young and vibrant person in the near future? One thing's for sure - her participation in the pageant has changed her forever. Two months of intense grooming and a comfortable stay at a five star hotel in Goa for the swimsuit round, has transformed her life

irrevocably. Will she able to go back to her humble chawl existence in an overcrowded area of labour class Mumbai and support her underprivileged parents now that she has tasted the good life? Or will this experience awaken her to her own potential that goes well beyond getting short listed for beauty pageants? My guess is that by now she perhaps would have bloomed into a grounded, well rounded professional, able to handle whatever life doles out to her. She is already a winner.

And yes - she is more than comfortable in her dusky skin!

## A ‘RAKHEL’ BY ANY OTHER NAME

*I*n this, the so-called Age of Enlightenment, when the Dalai Lama himself is sending out a powerful message to the world regarding gender equality by declaring: ‘I am certainly not the best Dalai Lama of 14, and certainly not the worst ... if a female reincarnation is more useful, why not?’, is anybody listening to this wise soul?

It doesn’t seem so, going by the shocking description used by a senior legal luminary while referring to a live-in girl friend as a ‘keep’. What a nauseatingly old-fashioned and archaic term that is ... and how obnoxious! What was the man thinking? I was vastly relieved and proud when my old friend, the feisty senior counsel Indira Jaising, spoke up strongly against the usage and asked a few tough questions.

‘Rakhel’ is the Hindi equivalent of ‘keep’ and sounds nastier still, even though it is merely a literal translation. It has an abusive ring to it and is frequently hurled at women in relationships outside marriage as the worst insult ever. Designed to denigrate and humiliate the shameless hussy who has dared to defy society by sharing a bed with a man not her husband, it is the sort of word that popular television soaps adore since it is bound to evoke a strong response – mainly from other women. The convention-obsessed moralists who feel sanctimonious and smug about their own legally recognized partners (same dolts who have tied the precious mangalsutra round their necks).

All these absurdities were floating in my head while watching a Marathi film that deals squarely with the subject. Based on a true story, it narrates the rather sad tale of a young woman who lives with the village school teacher for thirty years but can never win the respect of the community because she is seen as a 'rakhel'. Worse, when the upright master dies, leaving her behind in their one room tenement, the old landlord resurfaces to throw out the hapless woman insisting she has no locus standi being just a mistress of the tenant and not his wife. She bravely challenges him in court... and wins. One has to understand the happy ending in the context of when the incident takes place (decades earlier). Given the fragile status of women at the time, her victory indeed qualified as a progressive landmark judgement.

But the crude comment we are talking about here was made by an erudite judge, no less. Was it just the terminology that sent shock waves throughout the country? Yes, of course. Terminology can never be interpreted in isolation – it is an apt indicator of a person's mindset. Indra Jaisingh had raised an important counter question when she'd boldly asked what a man is called when the situation is reversed? Is he also disparagingly dubbed a 'keep' in court? If not, then why not? Why the double standards?

As I write this, countless 'virtuous' women in North India have just finished fasting for their men. 'Karwa Chauth' has become one of the most important dates in the calendar of certain ladies, clearly inspired by the over romanticized portrayal of this ritual in popular cinema. From those melodramatic shots of Kaajol fasting for Shah Rukh Khan (not yet her husband) in Yash Chopra's immensely popular *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* released in 1995, millions of misguided wives have taken to observing 'Karwa Chauth' in a big way. This involves not just starving in style, waiting for the moon to rise and the husband to return, but also

applying mehendi, dolling up in bridal finery, receiving extravagant gifts and generally bonding with like minded girlfriends over music and other distractions.

Since 'Karwa Chauth' has become such a huge annual farce, it is worth asking why there is no known equivalent that requires a husband to fast for the long life of the long suffering wife! I don't know of a single custom in our culture that makes any such demand on men. The onus of keeping a marriage going, the children and spouse happy, ensuring prosperity, good health and success for all, rests squarely on the woman's delicate shoulders. She's the one who starves, fasts, prays, punishes herself in various ways 'for the sake of the family'. All that is expected from the man of the house is his mighty presence. So long as he feels like Hercules and is treated like Superman, everyone is pleased, especially the gods.

And guess what? Women who are official 'rakhels' and 'keeps' observe 'Karwa Chauth', too!

## BEWARE, THE CORPORATE BLADDER ...

The annual Chick Fest also known as the International Women's Day will be celebrated dutifully on 8 March. But to organizers of assorted celebrations and festivities, I have just one question to ask - and I ask it aggressively: Where will all those women 'go'?

Sounds like an innocuous question? Not so! It needs to be screamed out loud! Women the world over have nowhere to 'go' and it is leading to a very serious serious medical problem that polite society refuses to recognize. The blunt and basic truth is, women have nowhere to urinate when they are in a public place. Women are supposed to exercise yogic control over their bursting bladders, especially when they travel. This year's railway budget generated a lot of heat, especially from women commuters complaining about a lack of loos at railway stations. If at all bathrooms do exist, they are generally locked up or filthy. With difficult access and no alternatives, women train themselves to hold it all in - for hours on end.

This leads to more than mere discomfort, let me tell you. Toxic levels begin to build up, leading to a whole host of, what are euphemistically called, 'female problems' (ranging from painful urinary tract infections to worse medical conditions). Despite this obvious neglect of basic bodily functions, women somehow feel coy, even ashamed of taking a 'pee break' even in offices that do provide separate

toilets for them. They don't like to make their way to distant bathrooms and horribly self conscious, even distinctly embarrassed when 'caught'. No such issues for men, who of course, are free to 'go' anywhere at any time - by the roadside, on the beach, behind rocks, against trees ... why, even along the railway tracks, their genitals on full view. Like they say: 'When you gotta go, you gotta go!' Unless you are a woman!

My entire being was obsessing over this vexing problem last week as I spent long hours inside a public hospital with an ailing relative. Let me put it this way - my mind was in my bladder. And my bladder was bursting. Such was my distress, I couldn't think beyond peeing - preferably in a clean loo with a lock on the door! There must have been hundreds of female co-sufferers that day who were unable to focus on the task they were there for and could only walk around with pained expressions, their legs tightly crossed. This was ridiculous and unfair. By the time I got home late in the evening, I was sure I wouldn't make it to the bathroom on time - such was the urgency. I was angry and impatient as I snapped at anybody in the line of fire. Several unsuspecting family members got it in the neck if they dared to cross my path - the one leading to the loo!

The scenario now shifts to another hospital - a plush private one this time. Similar story. Except that there was supposedly a loo reserved for women on the premises - but it was tucked away in some obscure corner. My daughter and I went on a determined lavatory hunt. We had a one point agenda - to pee or not to pee was hardly the question - we HAD to. Just then, a gentleman in a bright red shirt walked up to us and whispered: 'Loo? Follow me...' He was a senior doc and had accurately guessed our mission ... he was our hero. Our saviour. Gratefully, we marched into his private domain and used the facilities reserved for

doctors. Once relieved, Dr R.R. Nawalkar spoke on the sensitive issue of the dearth of toilets for women across the world and how it has always been a low priority. The apt term 'Corporate Bladder' syndrome comes from him and encapsulates this condition perfectly. He talked about women with exaggeratedly bloated bellies that have nothing to do with being fat - it is actually an overstretched bladder that is unable to 'deflate' after years and years of abuse. 'Think of a balloon that is blown up and blown up. Suddenly you take the air out ... but the balloon cannot regain its original shape after being that stretched.' Dr. Nawalkar has spent a lot of time studying this universal crisis and said it was time women spoke up and demanded these basic conveniences in public places.

He is so right. That's the reason why I am writing about this important issue. It is straight from the heart. But it is also from the bladder. On International Women's Day, I demand the Right to Pee. This is no laughing matter. I hope it is taken seriously, especially by our president, Shrimati Pratibha Patil (at the time of writing).

## CAREER GALS WHO GIVE UP

*This* is becoming a major issue world wide.

Women in the work force are getting it baaaad from both sides, and they don't know how to react ... what to do?

If they give their all to the career, they are damned for being too 'hard core'. If they ask for flexi time once they get married, bosses accuse them of demanding too much down time. If they give up totally and focus on family, husbands start blaming them for 'doing nothing'. Even worse – the same men who once cribbed about their wives' careers getting top priority, feel resentful about the women 'hanging around' at home and enjoying all the perks while contributing zero to the kitty. Sounds familiar? It does to me.

I have seen it happen to a couple of girlfriends recently, and they are totally zapped by the strange, even hostile, response their 'sacrifice' was generating. Said one plaintively: 'I thought I was being the bigger person by giving up a job I loved. But instead of appreciating my attitude, my husband started to openly criticize me.' She isn't the only one. At a recent seminar meant to address some of the trickier issues faced by women professionals, some of the young ladies voiced their disappointment at the way their men (at work and at home) were reacting to the daily tight rope walk they performed. Even when it came to maternity leave! 'We postpone having babies because we aren't sure our job

will be waiting for us,' said one sadly. Another admitted: 'It's a tough call. Our mothers-in-law demand a baby in the first year of our marriage. The husbands want to please their mothers. We want to please our husbands. But in the process, everything goes for a toss.' Yet another lady admitted the worst part of this see-saw (career-home) was the fear that another female colleague who is single, will muscle in swiftly to take over the temporarily vacated slot. 'It is so competitive these days. If I go away on long leave, some other person promptly displaces me. When I get back, my seniority is gone! How can I suddenly start reporting to a junior?'

I decided to speak to a few men just to get their take on this prickly issue. The first guy was pretty cool about it - but only on the surface. His live-in partner had told me a very different story. I had met them both in their gorgeous home and seen the difference for myself. The same man who once flashed his super glam, super successful lady-friend proudly in front of acquaintances while listing out her various accomplishments, appeared irritable and impatient with her new avatar - that of a devoted haus frau, looking after guests and making sure the dining table groaned under a fabulously orchestrated menu.

What had snapped? Wasn't she being the perfect society hostess? Isn't that what he'd said he wanted? Well ... yes and no. He wanted what most men want today - a superwoman. Someone who worked hard, and partied even harder. A woman he could flaunt - recognized in public, applauded for her success, but also the perfect home maker who'd match him drink for drink, make dazzling conversation and be great in bed!

Too bad! I told the woman she should reclaim her own life instantly and move out of this guy's plush apartment with her head held high.

But did she listen? Naaah! She's still there, whining and whining about how indifferent he has become, how unappreciative, how distant. I hated to say: 'But honey, you've brought this upon yourself - don't you see?' The woman this guy had flipped for in the first place was a dynamo draped in sexy couture, who travelled the world cutting mean deals. But this 'new, improved' woman was just another devoted and dull housewife!

What a dilemma - for both! Now they are truly stuck. She has taken a great liking to full time domesticity, and he has developed a roving eye. What is the solution for women caught in a similar bind? Hell ... I wish I knew the answer. But for her sake, I hope she replaces the floor mop with a lap top real soon. Or else there will be more trouble.

For her!

## NOBEL THOUGHTS ...

*W*hen a woman is eighty-eight years old and a living legend, one goes to meet her with a certain amount of baggage ... and expectation.

I was overwhelmed at the thought of being in the same room as Nadine Gordimer. So you can imagine my exhilaration when I was seated to her left by the host, at a small dinner in her honour during her last trip to India, a couple of years back.

Surprise number one: her eyes and voice. Both belonged to a young person. A very young person. The eyes were alert and watchful, the voice, girlish and beguiling. 'Nadine ... please call me Nadine,' she insisted delicately helping herself to saffron rice while taking small sips from a whiskey tumbler. Dressed in a simple black kurta, she was almost flirtatious while talking to her Indian minder, a very handsome and charming wing commander who had drawn up her programme. He was equally flirtatious with the writer as the two of them cracked private jokes. She called him her 'jailor', he referred to her as 'ma'am'. Throughout their exchange, her lovely grand-daughter Paule, looked on with fond amusement at her celebrated granny. It was clear they shared a great rapport.

Paule has a sister named Pascale, and Nadine explained that her own daughter wanted two sons but produced girls, who were then given masculine names by the disappointed

parents. The comment led to a lively discussion on gender, and Nadine was very clear on that score – gender-neutrality is the way forward. She spoke with a quiet passion, using her hands to make a point.

Her programme in Kolkata originally featured an interaction with women in media. ‘Journalists are journalists. I don’t see them as men or women. I refuse to meet only women – why exclude the men?’ she exclaimed as the conversation turned to women in power. Nadine once again surprised me when she said, power is power – it does not recognize gender. She went on to add that powerful women are as corrupt and drunk on their positions as men.

When Nadine states a point of view, it is obvious there will be no further discussion on the subject! Names like Indira Gandhi got tossed around, but Nadine stuck to her stated position, and changed the subject swiftly, bored with the topic and desiring to move on to something more interesting.

Vidia Naipaul’s name cropped up, and she turned up her nose, while narrating how rude and ungracious Sir Vidia was when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 (she won it in 1991). ‘He did not bother to meet anybody or talk to the other awardees. He came down from his room only to make his acceptance speech and went right back again!’ Nadine sounded genuinely offended ... like a dowager queen, snubbed by a loutish subject.

Even though Nadine wears her laurels lightly, there is an air of imperiousness about her that is unmistakable. ‘My biggest regret in life is that I didn’t learn a single African language ... when I should have ... when I could have.’ Her girlish demeanour when she discussed her own impressive body of work is most disarming: ‘I prefer readings to delivering lectures ... perhaps that has to do with my early ambitions to become an actress.’ Well ... looking at her porcelain beauty

in the eighth decade of her life, I could perfectly visualize her as a young girl growing up in South Africa, observing, observing, observing ... absorbing, commenting, storing....

Oh God! How many hearts must she have broken! Even today, as she commandeers the room, one can easily sense that here is a woman who is perfectly aware of her considerable powers - literary and beyond. Her tiny frame may deceive the unwary into believing otherwise, but Nadine Gordimer knows her unique place in history and is not shy to quietly revel in it. As someone who does not believe in acknowledging gender-differences and frankly says she prefers Albert Camus to Jean Paul Sartre or even Simone de Beauvoir, Nadine is one feisty lady nobody should even think of messing with. 'I inhabit the characters in my novels when I write them .... Their voice becomes my voice. For any writer, it always starts with the character ... my readings are far from flat .... I read with dramatic intonations and make the book come alive,' she said with a matter-of-factness that is entirely captivating.

By 9 p.m., Nadine had decided she had had enough. She made the standard 'Thank you' speech about how privileged she felt being in such lively company, how she enjoyed the arguments etc. etc. Even if all of us that night knew full well that she was just being polite, it still felt good, like a sincere and personal compliment from one of the world's greatest living writers. To my complete delight, I discovered a favourite exclamation we both have in common - 'Eeeeeesshhh'!

I picked it up from my Bengali husband. I'm curious where Nadine got hers from!!

## WHY WE LOVE SACHIN'S WIFE

*Anjali* Tendulkar is like an unblemished English rose. Everybody loves her. She is India's favourite bhabhi.

I have yet to meet a single person who has an adverse comment to make about Sachin's wife. She is pleasant looking, ever smiling, discreet and admirably low key. She has spoken just once during their long marriage, that took place on 24 May 1995, and that was after Tendulkar was anointed Saint Sachin (after the record breaking 175 runs in Hyderabad in 2009). Till that point, one would catch glimpses of her driving their kids to school or picking up Sachin at the airport. Not one for partying, Anjali managed to stay out of Mumbai's hectic social scene, without offending anybody. At a time when celeb couples are busy cashing in on their colossal brand value and shooting together for multi-crore commercials (Ajay Devgun-Kaajol, Saif-Kareena, Bipasha Basu-John Abraham), can you imagine what the Tendulkars could have raked in had they endorsed some product together? It may happen in future, but it is a wonder it hasn't in the past.

Anjali definitely falls into the 'neighbour's envy, owner's pride' category, even if that format of the idealized desi bahu no longer works for a large number of urban Indian families. Somewhere, at the backs of our minds, we still secretly admire an Anjali for all the qualities that are fast disappearing in our cities. Anjali gave up a career (she's a

qualified doctor) to raise a family (two kids). She chose to become a full time homemaker when her generation of educated women the world over were forging ahead aggressively and shattering glass ceilings at the work place.

She stayed out of the limelight when other wives (Posh Beckham there, Sangeeta Bijlani here) of star sportsmen were busy flaunting their privileged status. She has always dressed in sensible, even dowdy, garments as opposed to super glam couture clothes. She has resisted walking the ramp for any high profile charity, though she quietly supports quite a few. She, more than any other celeb spouse has lived the role of a modern day pativrata - silent, loyal, caring. The Perfect Wife, who has understood her position in marriage (secondary) and placed her own personal priorities on the back burner. No ego. No conflict.

All hail Anjali!

Even Michelle Obama with all her high ratings (she consistently scores over her husband in the popularity stakes), is known to hog the show on occasion and play up to the media while pushing her image as a clotheshorse and fashion icon. Being the intelligent, educated, smart wife of the 'most powerful man on earth', is a tough call for any woman. Similarly, for Anjali, being the wife of one of the biggest sports icons in the world is an equally daunting job - what with more than a billion people tracking each move and word. So far, Anjali has not missed a single step.

Being Sachin's wife can't be easy. For most of their married life, the cricketer has been missing in action. No matter how wonderful a dad/husband he may be, the fact is, he can't be around like a regular family man who holds down a 9x5 job. Anjali has never cribbed ... at least, not in public. Her devotion to the man is apparent enough, when she says she doesn't eat a single morsel when her husband is

batting. Oooofff! That adds up to a lot of uneaten morsels given his performance over the last sixteen years.

Sachin's one hell of a blessed guy. He, more than any other icon - from Bollywood stars, sports personalities, politicians, seems to have it all. And a lot of that 'all' rests in Anjali - no wonder she is swiftly gathering a fan following of her own. If her fan club needs a president - main hoon, na!

She has raised the children with an equally unfussy, uncomplicated attitude. Unlike several brat kids of famous parents, Tendulkar's two are model bachchas who have obviously been brought up to be seen (if at all), but not heard. The little fellow plays cricket, the little girl watches cricket, the mom lives cricket, while the dad breathes cricket.

Parivaar ho to aisa. Biwi ho to aisi.

*Three*  
THE SEXES

## MARRIED ... AND BORED!

It's an old, old story ... but like any worthy classic, it never dates.

Whether it is Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* or the more recent Shefali Shah interpretation in *Kuch Luv Jaisaa*, the married-but-bored housewife continues to fascinate us. When I wrote *Socialite Evenings* (my first book) twenty-five years ago, I was savaged by critics (hello! So what else is new?), mainly because Karuna, my protagonist, walks out of a marriage that is boring. BORING! Not abusive, not cruel, not oppressive. I believed then, as I do now, boredom is a perfectly legitimate reason to end a relationship. Terminal boredom, that is. Not to be confused with 'boring phases' which most marriages go through.

Imagine the tedium involved in spending the best years of one's life with a person who is dull, uninspiring and plain 'duh'. Better to invest even five short years in an individual who hits the right spots and makes you feel vibrantly, gloriously alive. During my short stay in Bhutan recently (I was there to attend 'Mountain Echoes', a real gem of a lit festival), I met a local lady who clearly believes in living life queen size. And why not? She is entitled to it! Beautiful, privileged, influential and adventurous, this gorgeous gal has been married four times and is a glam granny to boot. She admitted candidly (minus prodding) that the only reason she kept up the quest for a suitable husband in that tiny

mountain kingdom was to keep boredom at bay! There was absolutely nothing for young people to do in the old days – no movies, no television, no internet, no restaurants, no bars, no airport ... you get the picture. How was a restless, educated and exceedingly beautiful young woman supposed to keep herself busy all day?

Dating was not an option (Bhutanese society continues to be very conservative ... almost medieval). Her only escape route and diversion lay in marriage. But hear this – all her ex-husbands remain good friends. She hosted a dinner for three of them last month, and it turned out to be great fun for all, she giggled. Why not? She is an upfront, engaging personality who now travels the world promoting causes dear to her heart. Bhutanese society has obviously made its peace with their most prominent socialite, going by the response to her.

Interestingly enough, our first encounter was an impromptu one in the buzzed bar of the wonderful Taj Tashi where I was staying. I noticed an attractive woman who was holding her own effortlessly with a group of six, fairly inebriated men. She came to my table, introduced herself and asked me to join them. I did so briefly, since I found her personality bewitching and electrifying in that strange setting. I discovered those rowdy, happy fellows lustily belting out Elvis Presley hits, were generals in the army and other high ranking officials. I still didn't know her identity but was sufficiently intrigued to ask around. When she invited me to lunch a couple of days later, I promptly accepted. There was a story in there ... a good one!

I was not disappointed. She is a special person – energetic, uninhibited, bohemian and what the Brits would call a 'good egg'. She described herself as a bitch, qualifying quickly, '... but a good bitch.' I knew exactly what she meant. Women like her are so easy to slot and damn. She means no harm to

anyone. And yet, her alluring presence does attract flak - a great deal of it. We discussed boredom as being the single most underrated cause cited in modern divorce. We both felt it should be right up there, with adultery and insanity. It is equally potent!

Nothing can destroy a relationship as swiftly as the realization that the person you are married to is a bloody bore, after all. Boredom cannot be salvaged or 'cured'. Marriage counsellors cannot talk a partner out of being boring. It is a condition - like diabetes. But unlike diabetes which can be managed through a sensible diet and medication, what does one do with boredom? Ummm ... very little. Shut up and put up?

More and more women are refusing to either shut up or put up. It's simply not worth it. Those who can move on are doing just that, leaving several rather bewildered men behind. Men who ask themselves what they'd done wrong to deserve such a fate. Now that's a seriously boring question! Sorry ... but if it has to be asked, the woman is perfectly justified in dumping the guy. Modern marriages are cruel, indeed.

Better that, than deathly dull relationships frozen in aspic.

## SLUTWALK? NO THANKS!

Come on, ladies... strut your stuff by all means. But don't downgrade yourself in the bargain.

What is all this rubbish about slutwalking your way to feminist heaven? Get real. Get a life. To start with, these kind of cheap stunts serve no purpose other than to titillate Page 3 paps. Besides, it's such a 'me too', depressingly 'wannabe' thing to do. Why not come up with something truly original - like the path-breaking 'pink chaddi' campaign? Why react to some dumb Canadian cop's sexist comment? By doing so, aren't women the world over giving him unwarranted importance and attention?

Seen in our cultural context, the idea of a multi-city slutwalk is an absolute no-no, even if the intentions behind the move are to shock and awe the men of this country. The only response to such a gimmick is likely to be the exact reverse of what was intended. Men will leer, peer, gawk and lech. It certainly won't make them stop dead in their tracks to review their mindsets. My main problem with this approach is the actual degradation of women implicit in the word 'slut'. If we fall for this ruse en masse and start addressing ourselves with such a nasty putdown, chances are not just men but other women too will jump down our throats and say: 'The bitch asked for it.'

The power of imagery and words is such. Self-deprecation works in progressive environments. Self-mockery is a potent

tool, but only in countries where literacy levels are high enough, and the audience sufficiently educated to know the difference between taunting perpetrators of violence, and playing up to a stereotype. Some of the images of slutwalks coming in from around the world look more like send-ups - exhibitionistic chicks flashing their goods for the cameras. When a busty female scrawls a 'Look, but don't touch' message across her ample bosom which is on full view, what is the average Joe meant to make of this display?

In India, a woman parading in the streets clad in a decollete bra will be labelled a 'besharam aurat'. Her reputation will be in shreds for evermore, and if single, her chances of finding a 'respectable' boy will plummet instantly. As for the state of her parents - aiyyyo - they may be forced to go into permanent hiding. But far more important than such a fallout, it's the counter productivity of the act that bothers me. Defiance is one thing - and I am all for it. But plain stupidity, quite another. The argument that today's woman is free to dress as she pleases, get sloshed at bars, use language any which way she chooses ... well, in theory, it's a great argument. Does it work? Naaah. Not even for her - the bold, brave and beautiful one who wants to break rules and conquer prejudice overnight.

There is also the reverse argument which involves mens' freedoms. Of course, we are used to the sight of men peeing by the roadside in broad daylight, or exposing themselves in public places (notoriously, on trains). But what if male colleagues in the work place decided to let it all hang out and challenged women not to complain? What about hanging out at a popular bar and finding topless men asserting their right to knock off that damn shirt in the heat? Or if men wore signs on their crotches during a protest rally that warned women to keep off the turf? Imagine a male boss turning up in a bulge-popping pair of skinny jeans on a

casual Friday, his shirt buttons undone up to his navel? Trust me, some prissy women would feel offended enough to file a complaint.

It goes back to the old: 'what's good for the goose...' theory. Rape and other acts of sexual violence against women (and men, too ... excuse me!), must be condemned and fought all the way. But I am just not convinced slutwalking is the answer to resolve an age old battle. Dressing to provoke a reaction from the opposite sex is as ancient as the hills. It's all a part of the mating game and existed way before the era of sexual politics came into the picture. Whether it's a scantily clad woman at a wedding or a man dressed in a cod piece at a formal event, the same rules apply. The definition of appropriate gear is timeless and has nothing to do with changing fashion trends. However, the decision to dress in skimpy attire with little regard for the cultural context is a matter of individual choice. By all means bare all if that's what you want. It is your right to dress as you please. But do so and bear the responsibilities and consequences of that decision as well.

Remember, just as there's no such thing as a free lunch; there's no free show either!

## WHEN A 'HEROINE' GETS PREGGERS

 Aishwarya Rai Bachchan's delicate condition generated more debate in India than the Lokpal Bill.

It would be fairly accurate to say that the then (unborn) Bachchan baby hit more headlines than any other baby in recent memory.

It all started with a tweet. The overjoyed grandpa (Amitabh Bachchan) obviously could not contain his excitement when he posted the news on a popular social networking site triggering off an avalanche of comments that got the chattering classes talking – and how! What should have been a personal and joyous moment for Aishwarya's family, was reduced to bazaar gossip by those who started to raise vexing issues connected to an actress' right to conceive as and when she wants. Mistake number one. And let's not quote from the Constitution and trot out dated feminist theories on the matter.

Any woman's pregnancy is a highly personal and intensely sensitive subject. A woman's relationship with her womb remains one of the most complex mysteries of life. Only a pregnant woman knows how she feels about herself, the new life growing within her, her relationship with those around her, and increasingly, her attitude to her career. Here came the tricky part: In Aishwarya's case, there were two factors working against her – she is one of the most high profile women in India. And secondly, there was a

great deal of ugly speculation surrounding her efforts to conceive in the first place. Add to that the fact that hers is not just any career - Ash is a superstar, not a teller in a bank nor a dentist's assistant, for example. Her vocation comes with very specific demands - and one of those is that she looks a certain way in the films she has signed on. It is on the basis of her physical attributes alone that she commands a certain fee in movies. If those attributes change, so does the decision of those who have invested big money in her.

This is where the pregnancy clause kicked in. 'Is it fair?' women asked. As a woman, mother and grandmother myself, let me state flatly - yes, it is. Just as a pregnant pilot will not be allowed to command a plane, or a female astronaut will have to opt out of a space programme if she gets pregnant, an actress in the family way can no longer perform the task for which she has been hired. There are legal, commercial and social issues involved. Which producer in the world would take the risk of subjecting his leading lady to enacting a role that places extra demands on her - physical and emotional? What if there is a mishap on the sets? Who takes the responsibility? Mainly, who pays?

Sounds horrible, but at the end of the day, it's about money. Movie making involves highly complicated financing options. It also involves team work. A producer is responsible for getting the entire project off the ground, and protecting his investment. That's how it works. He signs on stars, who in turn are expected to do their bit to ensure the film's success. In today's day and age, babies can be planned well in advance. And if an unplanned pregnancy does take place, the actress is obliged to take the producer into confidence so he/she can figure out how to work around the good news - scrap the film (provided it is in its early stages), replace the heroine (difficult in this particular case, since the film centred around Aishwarya), put the project on hold

for a year (and pay used amounts by way of interest), or simply cut his/her losses and move on.

Tough. But there it is.

Hollywood recognized the need to put in such clauses into contracts years ago. There are similar clauses for heroes who have to undertake certain precautions that they don't expose themselves to high risk situations (skiing, horse riding, flying planes, racing cars etc). Perfectly understood by all - and adhered to, as well. That's what penalty clauses are all about - you default, you pay. Simple. Why should any woman who takes her career seriously, object to something as basic? Professionalism demands a high level of commitment to the job. So does motherhood. Unfortunately, women, more than men, are compelled to choose. Blame biology, not the producer.

At that stage I had openly said that 'Aishwarya should not worry about anything beyond her baby right now. Nothing is as precious or important. Forget legal issues and technical arguments about who's wrong and who's right. Her health is all that matters at this stage. And a safe delivery should be her sole priority. As for those carping about clauses and contracts... well, it's nappies first, okay?'

Who says a movie star's life is easy?

## HAVE WOMEN FORGOTTEN HOW TO FLIRT?

I read Julia Stephenson's terrifically spirited *Spectator* column recently in which she laments the death of flirting in Britain ... and chuckled to myself.

Forget Europe, where flirting is an art form and equally appreciated for being that, in India, the land of 'naayikas', and apsaras, we too are stupidly following the Brits and forgetting what it's like to enjoy a mild flutter, create a delicious frisson, and for a few brief moments, lose oneself in that wonderful space that makes hearts go 'dhak dhak'.

Julia is hugely distressed by the coarse behaviour of 'ladettes' - young ladies representing the 1990s, who mimic the worst laddish (read: loutish) behaviour by boozing it up, rioting, brawling at pubs and vomiting in the streets. These women resent what they consider old fashioned male attention and often snarl at a gentleman opening doors for them or offering a seat in the tube. Julia feels it is this crude and rude response to traditional male etiquette that has driven British men to turn ridiculously timid! According to Julia, British men are too terrified to flirt!

Is that happening to 'desi boyz' as well? Are we turning our chivalrous, gallant guys into ninnies who refuse to make eye contact with a pretty girl for fear of being slapped? I was talking to a youngish woman recently, who admitted she has all but forgotten what it's like to be desirable ... attractive to the opposite sex. 'Nobody looks at me!' she whined. And

she isn't alone! Like her, thousands of much younger girls crib they are feeling de-sexed and unappreciated.

One of the main reasons is that men are scared of being accused of sexual harassment, particularly at the work place. Even harmless, appreciative compliments are not welcomed by female colleagues. These days, a man is asking for trouble if he says: 'Lovely saree,' or 'This colour really suits you.' Internationally, men have been sacked for lesser 'crimes'. And women find it hard to recall when they last received a compliment from a chap. How sad is that? It happened to me (compliment!) very recently when I ran into someone from college. I was initially flustered, then confused, and finally abrupt! Poor fellow behaved like he'd just got a tight slap, as he hastily apologized and fled! I kicked myself later for my inexcusable conduct. But it was too late to do anything about it by then.

When I got home, I recalled a lovely encounter with a famous woman I'd spent time with in Delhi. I was there to interview her for a glossy and she invited me into her boudoir while she got ready for the shoot. I wondered why she was constantly dropping the pallu of her chiffon saree and then replacing it delicately over her left shoulder, all the while gazing at her image in a gigantic mirror. After the thirtieth time, I finally asked her if she needed a safety pin to hold it in place. She smiled: 'Darling, I am practicing, it's an old habit!'

She went on to explain how she used the pallu trick to 'flirt'. I found that amusing, if a bit tacky. But at least she bothered! Nobody does, any more. Not even young girls looking for romance. Most times, they hang around at parties chatting animatedly (even dancing) with one another. At the end of the evening, they crib: 'As if we had a choice; did you see the men? Losers!' Poor men! Damned if they do, and damned if they don't! So, I asked some of these

accomplished ladies why they even bother to dress up, look terrific and hit the social circuit. Do they not want male attention? 'Of course, we do ... but from the right guys.' Social interactions are so very complex these days! Where are these 'right guys' hiding? And what's wrong with girls taking the initiative?

As Julia points out, flirting is not infidelity. Or even a prelude to an affair. 'It's more about *joie de vivre* than sex,' she states. I love the way she clarifies that Europeans view such flirting as 'routine good manners'. So it is. Really! So, what about that little eye flutter, ladies? Nothing too obvious, mind you. Just a teeny weensy one to remind ourselves we are female and the old mating game isn't entirely *passé*.

But for us to pull this off, we also need men to be men ... come on, guys, are you up to it?

## Is PARIS BURNING?

If you've never heard of a creature named Paris Hilton (real, not assumed name), please don't lose sleep over your 'ignorance'.

Paris is a phenomenon that is likely to baffle social scientists for years to come. It is impossible to avoid the young lady, quixotically named after a city adored by her doting parents, who just happen to be wealthy hoteliers – surely, the Hilton brand needs no introduction? I recall a news report about Paris (updates are available on the hour, in case you are an avid Paris-watcher), which involved her pet chihuahua, yes, the little dog that Paris converted into the world's most coveted fashion accessory. I read that some lunatic fan had shelled out \$305 on eBay, for an empty can of dog food, retrieved from Paris' trash can! This goes beyond devotion and hero worship. I don't think even the most desperate of actor Rajnikant's fans would bother to rummage through his dust bin. But that's America ...

Paris is a by product of the manic celebrity syndrome raging through that vast nation, and to understand the hold she has over her admirers, one has to understand what Paris stands for. Critics dismiss her as an empty headed bimbo, whose claim to fame doesn't go beyond her blond hair extensions. That she has been in a clink has now become international news. Interest levels were feverish during her jail term and can be explained away as a vital part of the

Paris obsession. No matter where she goes and what she does, Paris hits the headlines. The fascinating part about the reams of coverage she gets not only has something to do with her unique persona ... but also with the fact that she represents the good life at its shallowest.

Paris is courted by the top retail brands worldwide and has a successful signature perfume that sells exceedingly well. What has made her so popular? My guess is it's her lack of an apologetic stance - Paris is totally out there when it comes to flashing her wealth (and toned body), unashamedly. She doesn't pretend to be a bleeding heart and brazenly continues to flaunt her assets in a manner so aggressive, one can't help but marvel at her guts. Most celebs in her league are obliged to demonstrate they have a conscience by contributing to international charities. What does Paris do? Precisely nothing!

She has acted as herself on a television show that underlines the big divide which separates the haves from the have-nots. Since it was a reality show, I expect her lines unscripted and spontaneous. Paris not only displayed utter disregard, even contempt, for the less privileged, she mocked those way below her social ladder. And the very same people adore her for insulting them!

Porn videos of Paris with one of her countless boyfriends got a record number of hits on the net. She pouted through that and any other controversy. There is hardly any area of her life that's remotely private .... But all this muck only adds to her mystique. What a paradox!

Paris fakes nearly everything, including her dumb blond posturing. She plays up to the stereotype, feigning ignorance and acting seriously stupid, when fact remains she makes money with everything she touches. How dumb can that be? In an era where smart women want to appear still smarter, and nearly every woman means business when she

declares she wants to be taken seriously, Paris has shrewdly made a career out of being vacuous ... or acting that way. Does she care what feminists think? Hell, no! Paris is too busy counting those greenbacks. She, in fact, has no issues behaving like the worst strumpet ... provided she's getting paid for it.

Paris has cashed in gloriously on the dumb blond stereotype. I'd say she has improved on the Marilyn Monroe model and dragged it into the 21st century. Teenage girls the world over worship Paris and hang on to every word she cares to lisp. Why? Because in this wisp of a woman (size zero, of course), they see a bit of themselves. They dare not go where Paris does, metaphorically and physically speaking. But wouldn't they just love to! Paris offers them a chance to live out their fantasies through her bizarre existence. What's a vicarious thrill or two, if it involves nothing more dangerous than tracking Paris' wild escapades? Maybe, Ms. Hilton is actually therapeutic.

In which case, Paris should run for president.

## MICHELLE (OBAMA) WOWS INDIA!

*Forget her funny frocks (whatever happened to the famous Lady O style?), and focus on her funny lines ('Ask my husband tough questions,' she urged students in Mumbai - and they did!).*

Michelle Obama won the popularity stakes hands down even as Barack, the 'Most Powerful Man on Earth' (still?) attempted and failed the charm offensive. You know why? Michelle was herself, while the president was programmed. He may have one of the toughest jobs in the world, but hey - hers is not that easy either. If anything, it's equally demanding and less acknowledged.

Being the First Lady is not what it used to be. The birdlike Mrs Nancy Reagan had perfected 'the gaze', Mrs Hillary Clinton, the scowl, while nobody remembers what it was that Mrs Laura Bush contributed to her husband's presidency. But here comes Michelle - a strapping, handsome woman with a Harvard law degree, who started her innings rather shakily with a couple of unorthodox remarks that shook the establishment and got the media on high alert. Perhaps the president's minders advised her to back off and zip up, for after those early, unguarded provocative comments that were dubbed 'racist' (sweet irony), the first Black American woman to occupy the White House has won admirers across the world for her warmth and spontaneity. In fact, her ratings are at an all

time high, even as Barack struggles to deal with a major setback in the Congress back home.

His 2010 India visit couldn't have been worse timed - for him and us. He picked mid-Diwali to visit. It's a little like Manmohan Singh picking a X'Mas or Thanksgiving weekend to call on the Obamas and expecting the average Joe in Washington to hang around and welcome him. Well, Singh may be King in India, and the comparison isn't too apt, but you get the drift. Michelle was expected to make up for her husband's glumness and lack of charm, which she did in abundance. Now here's the catch - she did not take the old route where all the First Ladies were required to do on state visits was look good and smile a lot (yoo hoo Jackie O!). Michelle, in her own special way, demonstrated an important trait - she was convincingly her own woman, speaking her mind spontaneously and reaching out generously to one and all. Michelle won our hearts. Obama's job was to win our minds. Between the two, it was clearly Michelle who emerged the real star.

It takes a great amount of intelligence for a woman in her position to underplay her own personality without it appearing fake. My guess is the Obamas are on to a good thing in their marriage. She has no ego issues, and neither does he when it comes to his wife. Unlike Hillary Clinton, who often came across a bit too strongly and appeared unattractively feisty, Michelle's personality is appealingly non-threatening - to men and women. Kids, of course, adore her - she speaks their lingo and accesses their world effortlessly (playing hop scotch in Mumbai didn't look like a staged photo-op at all). Her smile reaches her eyes and when she listens to her husband, she does so attentively but not rapturously. This pleases the feminist in all of us.

Much has been written about her dress sense and how local fashionistas were disappointed that she picked frumpy 'safe' outfits in drab colours for her India trip while her myriad fans had hoped for brights and bling. I had visualized her in a vibrant rani pink saree with chunky accessories or something a little more exotic (would have happily settled for a peacock brooch!). But it was her extraordinary ability to connect in a sincere and transparent way that shone through. If her husband (Mr Teleprompter) managed to salvage his rather lackluster Mumbai chapter when he addressed both houses of parliament in Delhi and came up with a few sparklers, it was Michelle Obama who walked away with our genuine admiration. As she waved her final goodbye, I found myself singing an old Bollywood hit picturized on Zeenat Aman in Nasir Hussain's *Yaadon Ki Baraat*, several moons ago: '*Chura liya hai tumne jo dil....*'

Barack Obama - we love your missus.

## SHAADI KA MAHINA ... MAHI VE!!

*D*honi did it! And did it in true super celeb style - quickly and stealthily.

India's star sportsman tied the knot with his 21-year-old love interest in mid-2010, somewhere in the distant hills of Dehradun. Perfect! Only a few khaas mehman attended the traditional ceremony away from the prying eyes of the watching world.

Since we are a long way off from the modus operandi followed by international paparazzi (not because we are coy or morally upright - we merely don't have the big bucks for it!), we had to make do with sketchy reports. It will take us years to catch up with asli celeb watching which involves hiring choppers and hovering over wedding venues taking grab shots of the nuptials that are later sold for a bomb! We don't have motorcycle stalkers from the media either (they drove Princess Diana to her death, remember?), or you can be sure some adventurous types would have reached the foothills of the Himalayas and ruined Mahi's maha moment.

A three layer security cordon made sure the wedding remained out of bounds and tantalizingly private. Just the way it should be, but rarely remains, when it involves mega celebrities. News filtering through indicated the two families had matched the kundalis of the two love birds before finalizing the auspicious date for the shaadi. Great! They had celestial approval, as well. Lover-boy Mahi turned

out to be quite a chhupa rustom, and I am sure he has left a lot of broken hearted female fans in tears, now that he is shaadi shuda. As for young Sakshi, she is perhaps one of the most envied girls on planet earth.

Kuch kuch hota hai when sports' icons get hitched. Even though comparisons are odious, how can we forget the Sania-Shoaib tamasha that turned into such an ugly jamboree? Perhaps Dhoni had just that disaster in mind when he decided to take to the hills and just do it! From all accounts, it was a smart move taken by a smart man. Mahi cleverly pre-empted controversies by presenting a fait accompli to the world. Not for nothing is he known as Captain Cool.

While all these festivities were being played out at a luxury spa in Dehradun, another kind of drama and hungama was taking place in Mumbai. Just ten days after the tragic suicide of Viveka Babajee, the 37-year-old model who hanged herself, her grief stricken family engaged the services of Dale Bhagwagar, an on-the-ball publicist (same chap who used to issue press releases by the micro second when he was handling Shilpa Shetty's public relations), to propagate the news of Viveka's actual relationship with Gautam Vora, the boyfriend who was interrogated by the cops. According to the family, these two were contemplating marriage and had also matched kundalis. Obviously, something went horribly wrong at some point. So wrong that the Vora boy refused to acknowledge he had enjoyed anything but a very, very casual friendship with the dead model. Well, the intimate photographs released by her family told an entirely different story. So much for kundali-matching.

The point is, some marriages happen. Some don't. But our society invariably gets excessively excited about the subject. When I wrote about the sad Viveka episode on my blog, the reactions were intense and personal. A lot of men

sympathized with Vora's situation, and went so far as to compare men with good wine (they get better with age), and women with milk (which curdles with age). What followed was a pretty heated 'comments war', either supporting or damning the guy who to all appearances ditched a trusting girlfriend just before the saat pheras could be taken. Perhaps no outsider can ever gauge what goes on in the heads and hearts of couples in committed relationships. But even a hard boiled skeptic would agree when it gets to the matching kundalis stage, it's got to be pretty serious. In Viveka's strange case, it seemed to have gone beyond kundali talk - her mother, Dayawanti, insists Vora had asked his girlfriend to consult a fertility expert about her ability to bear children.

If true, this is such a shocker! And to think we are talking about a supposedly hip and cool 21st century couple, not semi-literates from small town India who were being pressurized by elders to get the girl 'certified' ('okay! All clear .... the bride's womb is good to go').

Two high profile couples. Two entirely different scripts for their respective 'Luv Storys'.

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India's biggest cricket superstar ever, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, is ten years younger than my older son, and almost the same age as one of my daughters. The thought that I could easily be his mother is seriously scary.

Why scary? Because, I'm certain I wouldn't know how to handle it. Look at the guy - just look at him! Is he for real? So wise, so cool, so mature, so damn successful! What did his mother eat when she was carrying this boy wonder in her womb? What were her thoughts? Her emotions? Was she on a special diet (soaked almonds? Pure ghee? Lassi?) or did she sing the right songs to her unborn child? Read

out cricket scores? Make him listen to cricket commentary? Recite from the scriptures? What?

I am sure there are countless mothers all over India wondering about the same thing. Especially mothers of toddlers who are aspiring test cricketers (at this point, what's the bet most little boys who watched the historic World Cup final, and Dhoni's spectacular sixer that clinched it, lisp that they want to grow up and be like him). We now know what it takes to be a champion (guts, talent and the right temperament). But what does it take to be the mother who produces such a champion?

I'm sure Devki Devi - the lady who gave birth to this extraordinary man must be extraordinary herself. Not in a flamboyant way. Not in the public space her son now occupies, but determinedly, quietly, steadily and surely. It is not often that mothers of male super achievers are given their due. Even Sachin Tendulkar, looks skywards and thanks his late father when he hits yet another milestone. We know Sachin has deep regard for his mother, but not much is known about Rajni Ramesh Tendulkar - the lady who gave birth to this living legend. Yuvraj's mother is more upfront while claiming her rightful place under the sun. Shabnam Singh doesn't hesitate to speak her mind when she thinks her precious son has not been appreciated enough. She even goes so far as to write a strong letter to an international fashion magazine that had dared to comment on Yuvraj's girth last year (they loved her feisty style, and printed it). After this victory, she has been both visible and audible talking about her ladla beta.

But today since it is Dhoni's moment as the captain of the Indian team, it's more relevant to track his antecedents. Besides, Dhoni's story is so much more dramatic; in fact, it reads like a television soap. This young man from Ranchi has scripted one of the most inspiring, real life stories ever

and like it happens in fiction, we want to know more about the lady who brought him into the world. From the little that is available in the public domain, Devki married Paan Singh and produced three children, two boys and a girl. She prefers to stay in the shadows and let her son's success do all the talking. She was admirably discreet even during her celebrity son's modest wedding last year. She has done a bloody good job of raising her kids. Nobody can taunt her by singing: 'Maa da laadla bigad gaya ...'

If I were in her shoes, I would have insisted on getting some exclusive 'Mommy-time' with the guy, before the world grabs and monopolises him. I would put in a precondition - no managers, lackeys, fans, hangers on, endorsement chaps, deal makers, cricket officials, body guards, stylists, advisors, chamchas, dieticians, bankers, physical trainers ... not even his lovely bride Sakshi. Just me and my boy, bonding over comfort food and conversation that has nothing to do with cricket. Over chai, daal chaaval and his favourite guilty snack,

I would make him laugh, even cry ... and forget he is MSD - the most successful cricket captain in the world right now. I would tell him over and over again that he's a champion - my champion. A permanent hero in a mother's eyes, regardless of wins and losses. I'd restrict my comments to light hearted banter and remind him of his carefree childhood, running around Ranchi in half-pants and bunking school.

The one thing I wouldn't do is treat him like a star - a mega star. I would not allow myself to be overawed or overwhelmed by his success. Nor make any references to those dramatic moments that brought so much joy to so many people. Nope. I would treat him like a 'normal' son ... shower him with love (the same love he has known since birth, nothing 'extra' because he is a super-celeb now), wipe the tears of joy from both our eyes with the corner

of my saree ... and carry on like nothing has happened ... and certainly, like nothing has changed ... nothing will ... regardless of circumstances. That's what moms are there for. To provide a reality check, along with unconditional love, no matter what ... no matter whom.

Dhoni has more than a billion admirers all over the world. But only one mother. He has the world at his feet, but I'm certain his biggest trophy of all time still remains his mom.

Well done, mummyji! India is proud of you.

## INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN OF THE WORLD

*This was long overdue!*

The Nobel Peace Prize 2011 was sensibly awarded to not just one woman, but three! Like a triple sundae - three flavours for the price of one! Clever. And pardon me if I sound cynical, but it does seem somewhat patronizing to lump three ladies in one basket and expect the world to cheer. High brow commentators have described it as a 'significant' decision.

Oh really? Why? Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakul Karman (Yemen) are women doing extraordinary work, with or without the Nobel. The 'significance', however, is being linked to associating women achieving peace and development, while being given a major role in governance. This is something right thinking people (not just women, mind you) have been fighting for over centuries. The Nobel is symbolic, yes. But effective? President Barack Obama was given the Peace Prize too, remember? And that had automatically taken away the sheen from the Swedish academy, which hands out the award. In a way, it had downgraded the Prize itself.

Now, perhaps women across nations will raise a toast to the three female winners and start believing a lot will change in the immediate future. Karman, the Yemeni activist is a fine example of a courageous woman who took on the mighty. So is Gbowee, who mobilized Liberian women,

Christians and Muslims, against rape and other brutalities in civil battles. Sirleaf, of course, is the first democratically elected female president of a war ravaged and notoriously corrupt country (Liberia), who successfully managed a serious debt crisis and restored peace after taking over in 2006.

There are several other, equally gutsy women in our own country. But they may never receive the same recognition. Dealing with alcoholism and violence or even being at the receiving end of unspeakably savage sexual acts committed by men in uniform is not new to us. But with activists being targeted and killed across India, it does require enormous courage to speak up and fight those in power. Perhaps, the Nobel Peace Prize will draw a little more attention to the contribution of women in healing, nurturing and leading communities that get battered during strife. Perhaps it will lead to a slow but permanent transformation within societies that have so far scrupulously excluded women from the decision making processes altogether.

But I suspect that's going to be a really long wait. Maybe, by the time my grand-daughter grows up she will be able to take far many more positive ground realities for granted than I ever could. In India, we display an almost schizo reaction towards women in power - we are either ridiculously awe-struck or ridiculously envious. Rarely do we respond to such women in a naturally accepting way. By placing a few on pedestals, does it help the others who are still struggling down there?

I just returned from a memorable trip to Paris where I attended the very prestigious Veuve Clicquot Awards for Businesswomen. The year 2012 will mark the 40th anniversary of this award which was started in memory of the feisty founder of the champagne brand that bears her name - Madame Clicquot. Widowed at a desperately

young age of 27, Mme. Clicquot took charge of her life and her husband's vineyard, to make something of both. And she succeeded spectacularly! Since 1972, only 300 carefully screened, hand-picked women have been bestowed the award. This year's awardees were a fascinating mix of ballsy entrepreneurs, but the one outstanding feature that united the twelve women (I happened to be the only awardee from India in the Inspirational Women' category), was a sense of fearlessness ... audacity, even.

From a shipbuilder in Netherlands, a structural engineer in the United Kingdom, to a butcher from Ireland, these were women with great personal histories and leadership qualities that were obvious and formidable. And yet, when it came to emotional acceptance within communities, the narrative changed and hit familiar roadblocks. Being successful entrepreneurs and being agents of real change are not necessarily the same thing. How we assess 'empowerment' also varies from culture to culture. But one thing is a constant - faith. Every single woman I spoke to during the intensive workshops, believed strongly in herself. Armed with such self-belief, she felt confident enough to take on any and every challenge in both her professional and personal life. If only similar self-belief could be converted into an injectible virus, what an amazing infection it would make!

Definitely, worth marketing those vials and starting a world wide epidemic!

## BELLE OF THE MANAGEMENT BALL

*S*he was initially startled, and then vastly amused, by a particular response.

Recently, at an intense workshop for high powered female managers from across India I had posed this 'simple' question - 'Who am I?' to the group that comprised 40, fiercely determined high achievers. Most of the ladies who had volunteered to share their answers, stuck to predictable statements such as: 'I am a mother, a wife, a daughter' and little beyond that. The clichés kept coming. A few variations were clearly aimed at impressing the bosses who were present: 'I am a leader ... a great motivator ...' Finally, one woman got up and announced defiantly: 'I am a thief, a cheat and a liar.'

Suddenly, every person in the room woke up and was on red alert. What? Was this woman totally crazy? Did she not care about her job and the poor impression she was creating? She had obviously anticipated just such a reaction. Calmly, she explained what she meant: 'I cheat on my husband by feigning interest in his conversation at the end of a long day, when all I want to do is put my feet up and relax. I lie to my bosses and pretend to be sick when I want to spend time with my baby daughter. And I call myself a thief for stealing time which does not belong to me to pursue my personal interests during work hours.'

After the shock value of her opening remarks had died down, and the real import of her words sank in, all the women present - her colleagues and competitors, started clapping and cheering enthusiastically. She was the undisputed belle of the ball. Why? She was the one person who had spoken the truth. And given the tense ambience - that took a lot of guts.

I talk to professional women's groups quite a lot, and the one commonality that often disturbs me is the lack of humour and the absence of poetry in their lives. Most of these women give the impression of being too uptight and wound up. Yes, they make a lot of money. But look at the irony of their situation - they have zero time to enjoy it! Yes, they get married, produce a child or two. But again, by the time they get home after putting in a twelve-hour-day at a soulless, impersonal work station, they are too exhausted to laugh, hug, chat or cuddle. The high pressure in the office robs them of any joy. Worse, it completely depletes their energy levels.

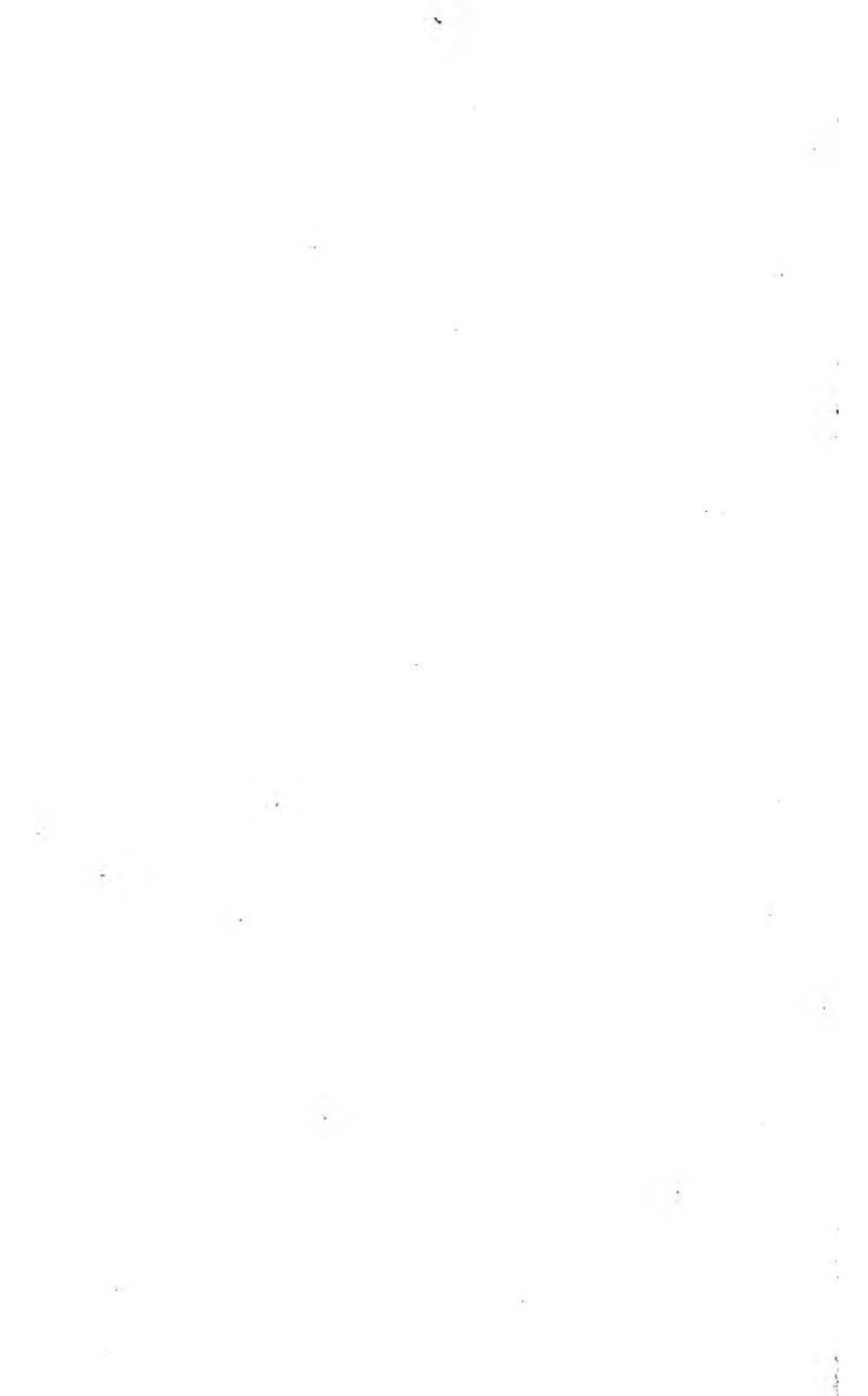
Often they are dealing with demanding clients from different parts of the world, functioning in time zones that are crazy for us in India. There are goals and targets that have to be met. Performance reviews that entail deep scrutiny. There is always the threat of an aggressive rival ready to displace the person and move into that vacated chair. Combine that with the so-called team spirit that has to be strictly adhered to even if you harbour murderous thoughts about the rest. ooooof!

Is it really worth it? What about an early burn out? And to get down to basics - what about a healthy sex life? These are women in their prime. And making love is a luxury they can't afford! Tragic! I boldly asked them if they made the time for sex in their young marriages. Most shook their

heads and sighed philosophically. One of them shrugged: 'Who cares? What use are husbands these days?' This was getting sadder and sadder.

At the end of my session, as I was walking out with the bright, ambitious supervisors who were pretty pleased about the response to the workshop, I asked one of them if they had a recreational facility in that vast, green and cheerful complex. A facility where these stressed out ladies could relax a bit, enjoy a foot massage, get their hair and nails done, feel a bit pampered, listen to music, enjoy art, flip through magazines and books, maybe catch up on a movie. The answer was a flat 'no'. But all you have here is an army of trained worker ants, I pointed out. I barely spotted a genuine smile or even a cheerful face. The women looked tense, preoccupied and miserable. How can they be productive if they are so robotic? The supervisors exchanged meaningful looks and answered mysteriously: 'We have our own ways to keep them motivated. Our subsidized cafeteria has the best chefs in town. We feed them well!'

Gulp. That was my food for thought. Sorry to say, I could barely digest it.



*Four*

THE HIGH AND LOWS  
OF THE MENFOLK

## WHY MALES ATTACK WOMEN?

*(I* have a pet theory.

We all know that the working woman in our metros is being routinely attacked. Remember the Mumbai molesters who disgraced the city by assaulting female revelers on a New Year's eve a few years back, leading to a national outrage?

Nearly every single day, newspapers carry horrific stories of female BPO workers being waylaid, even killed, by random men. Rape? One every minute. Nobody is spared, not even the female foreign tourist, who seems to 'ask for it' simply by being a single white woman, dressed for sight seeing. Most of the time cops take a very casual stand on such incidents, displaying a shocking lack of concern for the victims. The message is: 'We have better things to do .... More serious crimes to solve.' So what exactly is going on?

I honestly believe this neo-aggression towards women has to do with the booming economy - the fact that women today are perceived as a major threat to the predominantly male work force. Just as Indian male students and techies have been the new targets in a recession-bound America ('Take that, you brown bugger for taking away our jobs') and racist Britain, in India we have found a brand new enemy - the female professional, who is making her presence felt on all levels, at the workplace and the home, leading to serious social issues. Unless we address this right here, right now,

we are going to see an escalation of crimes against women in the coming years.

The phenomenon of co-workers who happen to be female and earning the same salary is comparatively new for India. Going by just the impressive numbers, it is obvious that women may soon dominate offices across the board. This is giving rise to a great deal of hostility and frustration in their male colleagues, who express their rage through acts of violence, which range from nasty emails, rumour mongering, slander, posting morphed pictures on pornographic sites ... or, in extreme cases, through physical attacks.

Machismo at its basest, but then, terrorizing females into submission through brutality and force is the only way for such men to give vent to their rising levels of anger. Muscle power is the only 'power' that gives men a perceived edge over women who cannot win this combat. Perhaps, men have decided to go all out and clobber females, since it is the sole arena left to them to prove their superiority. Assertion on any other level requires a different set of skills. Women have proved their worth several times over when it comes to competing fairly in a cerebral context. Given that their contribution to the family kitty, and consequently to the economy, can no longer be ignored, men are in a dilemma - there is no road map. No guidelines. A woman's financial contribution is required in order to maintain the new lifestyle. But her enhanced status in a tradition-bound society has still to be acknowledged.

Men are finding it very hard indeed to accommodate the 21st century female, who has carved an admirable place for herself in society. I may be wrong in saying this, but I strongly suspect career men are viewing their female contemporaries as rivals grabbing the same slice of the pie. And there is just so much pie to go around.

I met a striking woman recently, who works as a senior scientist in a pharma company in Delhi. She told me how tough it was to be taken seriously by her colleagues, since she didn't 'look' like a scientist! She frequently received anonymous hate mails, urging her to quit and make place for a 'family man' who has a wife and kids to support! Did that bother her? She shrugged and said philosophically that she'd taught herself to live with hostility, even occasional verbal abuse.

The fear is: when does verbal abuse transform into physical attack? And if that does happen, how is a woman to defend herself? Can she depend on the law to protect her? Society to support her? No chance! She must find the resources within herself to safeguard her own interests. Not easy. But there is no other option. Does that mean all working women need martial arts training? Pretty much. If it comes to hand-to-hand combat, and dealing with a rapist, women should not think twice, but go straight for the kill, adopting whatever method it takes to protect herself. It's the Lara Croft approach, or nothing. As for those pathetic male creatures who think they can 'fix' a woman by humiliating her, the ultimate weapon is still in female hands: We can do without men. Can they do without us?

Remember: no womb, no babies!!

## FAR FROM 'GAY'

Perhaps it is the worst cliché to trot out in such absurd circumstances, but say it, I must!

Some of my best friends are gay. I love and cherish them more than my gal pals. These friendships go back a long, long way... thirty years? And have endured through good times and bad. Can't say the same about my relationship with girlfriends.

Back in those days, gays were crudely referred to as 'homos' and cruelly dismissed by straights who'd shudder at the prospect of being in the same room as them, claiming it was their prerogative to accept or reject such 'perverts'. Well, going by the clumsy police action in Mumbai some time ago, I'd say three decades later, nothing much has changed. Society at large continues to be hostile and suspicious of people who prefer same sex love. Why else would the Thane police bother to raid a gay party and detain people? What was the crime? That a bunch of guys had decided to hire a suburban bungalow, share a few drinks and perhaps, have sex? All the party goers were consenting adults, and the cops found nothing more shocking than liquor and condoms on the premises.

Strange, that a private party being held behind closed doors would attract police action. Unable to book them for some terrible crime, the bumbling policemen tried to haul them in for possession of alcohol without a permit!

Isn't that a laugh? In which case, more than 50 per cent of private parties would be in trouble and several high profile celebs under a scanner. What a colossal waste of time and money.

Justifying the raid, Y.P. Singh, the controversial cop-turned-lawyer pointed out that the party had been advertised as a homosexual get together. Said Singh: 'The police have the powers under Section 149 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) to take preventive action, but in this case perhaps they stopped the party prematurely. They seemed to have goofed up the trap.'

Trap? What trap? To catch a bunch of like-minded fellows boozing? Having consensual sex? Come on, isn't it time the archaic Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) under which a homosexual act is an offence (non-bailable and cognizable!) is dumped?

Vikram Seth had initiated a signature campaign a few years ago, asking for this draconian law to be changed. For a while, the media picked up on the story and ran with it. Soon, everybody lost interest and that was that.

Today, the gays in India remain as marginalized as ever. Perhaps, the only 'progress' they have made is that they are more visible and vocal, even in the face of stepped up attacks and consistent rejection. Their portrayal in commercial cinema, television and popular culture remains caricatural and hostile. The few high profile gays who have dared to 'come out' have done so in the knowledge that they'll inevitably be facing prejudice and ostracism. All this seems absurd given the way the rest of the world is responding to the sensitivities of the community.

As for the cops and their constant harassment of gays, one wonders about their priorities. Why such a homophobic reaction when hard core terrorists and criminals are treated with such leniency? Why come down so heavily on people

who just happen to have different sexual leanings? Look at the irony: our society is so exaggeratedly judgemental towards gays, but so indifferent to the plight of abused women and children. What a paradox.

Cops are reluctant to take action against men who scald, torture, rape and kill women, but will spare no effort to catch gays 'red handed'. It's one other way to blackmail a vulnerable section of society - yet another extortion racket where the 'guilty' will quietly pay up. Basically cops are no different from regular people who continue to harbour anti-gay hang-ups. Scratch the surface and you'll find exactly the same deep-rooted prejudices that reflect society's unease with what are termed 'unnatural acts'.

So, how 'natural' is it for a man to overpower a woman and inflict pain? Or to sexually abuse an innocent child and scar the little one for life? It's time we re-examined our narrow-minded attitude towards gays - it might throw up a few interesting (and not too appetizing) things about ourselves. Haven't you noticed that we generally spew hatred on people who remind us a bit too much of ourselves?

## DIRTY OLD DESI MEN

*T*was not in India when Narain Dutt Tiwari's filthy laundry got washed in public.

Whatever filtered through sounded dreadfully gross. As more and more sordid details came tumbling out of that over-crowded closet, I raised a cynical eyebrow and asked myself: 'So, what else is new?'

Tiwari isn't the first dirty old man in Indian politics to be caught with his dhoti down. And you bet he won't be the last. There is something pretty nasty about power, politics and sex that leads to combustible situations of the nauseating kind. Not just in India, not just in the 21st century, but as a wide spread phenomenon across the world since time immemorial. Some stupid men get caught. That is perhaps the only difference.

What shocks society at large is not that these chaps have a grimy record of promiscuity and sexual exploitation, but the fact that they are still 'doing it' at that age! It is not so much a moral issue, as a medical one. An 'ageist' thing. Believe me, nobody would have been as scandalized had Tiwari been a man in his 40s or 50s. What we find abhorrent is the senior citizen, grandpa status of the old goat. And since our hypocritical moral brigade is not accustomed to dealing with such issues (I mean, compare India's outrage to 86-year-old Tiwari's masti to the 76-year-old former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's brazen handling of his

sexual adventures in Italy), everybody is huffing and puffing away while hanging on to each yucky detail.

Most of the comments are based on the man's advanced years. A lot of them (mainly from far younger men) are tinged with envy: 'What does Tiwari eat for breakfast - Viagra?' There is an incredulous, almost jealous, tone to those remarks. What that suggests is pretty obvious: 'How come he is still getting it up and I am not?'

Hardly anybody bothers about the women who have serviced Tiwari - what they feel about their bodies being used by a man old enough to be their Daadu. Sickened? Or is it just a case of business as usual, and to hell with the fellow's doddering years?

Our revulsion has a lot to do with the fact that at a time of his life when Tiwari ought to be looking towards meeting his maker, he is actually thinking of making out with the neighbourhood wench. Indian society being as rigid as it is, men and women have their life spans cut up neatly into appropriate compartments. Tiwari's delayed 'vanvaas' upsets us. We feel the man has no business to be indulging in carnal affairs when his mind, body and soul should belong to God. Our imposition of these arbitrary 'laws' is so peculiarly rigid, that we find it impossible to accommodate an older man's libido.

Come on, let's be honest, women are revolted at the thought of sleeping with a vintage model. And men are way too jealous of his performance! Everybody hates Tiwari for not conforming to society's set definitions and standards. Period.

Strange and annoying as it is, we have ourselves to blame. There will always be a neighbourhood Tiwari leching away at nubile girls. And there will always be a set of highly offended auntyjis and unclejis ready to condemn such a person. Rarely will we spare a thought for the man's

unwilling bed partners, or even his wife and family. It is as if they are nothing more than bit players who don't really count. We choose to obsess over the 'pervert's' sexcapades instead and wish him a terrible, painful end for committing all those sins. We assume morally superior positions and debate endlessly on what a terrible example he is setting. We talk about the guy's depravity and decadence. But the bottom line is slightly different. The unspoken emotion is one defined more by awe than shock. In an almost perverse way, there are those who may be secretly saying: 'That dude rocks...!'

Horrible, but true. Deal with it.

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The old boy is something else ... mind it!

Let's hand it to N.D. Tiwari. Not only was he in total denial during the prolonged period of a messy paternity suit filed by Rohit Shekhar, his biological son, but even today, after losing the case, Tiwariji remains unabashed and brazen as he declares boldly: 'I have full rights to live as I want.'

For Shekhar and his mother, it has been an agonizing battle fighting for their own rights. Rights, that may now include another bitter war over N.D. Tiwari's considerable property. Was that really what this was all about - property, money, assets? Perhaps.

This ugly controversy could have been handled with more discretion and dignity, had Tiwari been more sensible. In the old days, men like him could walk away from their obligations and responsibilities very easily. All they had to do after a one night stand was to callously abandon the woman. Powerful politicians could get away with this and more. But unfortunately for Tiwari, he hadn't factored in a few key things when he bedded Rohit's mother over 30 years

ago and conveniently forgot all about it. God knows how many more Rohits and Rohinis, Tiwari may have fathered!

But here was one Angry Young Man, who was not prepared to let it go so easily. He went to court. And insisted on a DNA test. Thirty long years ago, such a test was not an option. How could Tiwari have anticipated such a twist in the tale? Obviously he hadn't ... and must have counted on immunity from any such investigation, if it ever arose. Who was Rohit Shekhar, anyway? A nobody. Who cared whether or not he was stuck with the tag of being born a 'bastard'? Certainly, not his father. But clearly Rohit was made of sterner stuff ... as was his mother.

It takes real guts for a young man in our patriarchal, feudalistic society to take on a person who has far more clout and far more money. A man who obviously believed Rohit's court case was nothing more than an annoying mosquito bite. Who cares about a son fighting for his mother's honour? In a society where a woman like Rohit's mother is invariably converted into the vamp of the piece for sleeping with a man not her husband, it is her moral character that is questioned. It is her child who has to bear the stigma of illegitimacy at every level. Tiwari must have counted on exactly that. It is to Rohit's credit that he soldiered on. And it is to the courts' credit that Tiwari was compelled to provide a blood sample that finally nailed him.

What happens next will be interesting to monitor. But if it does turn into a property issue, everything else be damned, well .... Tiwari deserves it. And Rohit has certainly earned his inheritance after being deprived for three decades.

If Tiwari does indeed have a change of heart and embraces the young man sincerely, apologises to his mother and unconditionally accepts both as family, it will make Tiwari a bigger person in the eyes of the public. But such a thing is unlikely to take place. Men like Tiwari have been

getting away with sexually exploiting women and discarding them at will since time immemorial. Our mythology is replete with similar stories. India has typically condoned men like Tiwari and pinned the blame on women. What happens between consenting adults is indeed their business. But what happens to children of such liaisons is more worrying. Rohit Shekhar (regardless of his motivations) may have done a huge favour to others in similar situations.

The days of suffering in silence are over. Every child has the absolute right to fight for what is his or hers by law. Most illegitimate offspring of influential fathers don't possess the required tools to fight for justice. Most abandoned women are too terrified of society's backlash to take such a risky route. Some are killed before they can contemplate such a step. Others find their mouths sealed either with money or threats to physically harm them and their child. Rohit Shekhar could have been bumped off years ago. That he is still alive is a miracle. That he has won, is not just a personal triumph and vindication of honour, but a victory for thousands caught in similar traps. As for Tiwari, it's too late for him to press the 'Rewind' button. And it's no use keeping his finger on 'Pause'. As for 'Fast Forward' - hell, if at 86, he's still upto his old tricks, one can only hope for his sake he has discovered condoms.

## THE INVALUABLES

*P*eople change. Values don't.

'Value' is such a loaded five-letter word. Difficult to define, difficult to compute. Yet, this much we do know: certain 'values' are universal ... eternal. Those are the ones that cut across cultures and centuries and cannot be challenged - truth, loyalty, goodness, honour. When it comes to compiling a list of 'India's Most Valuable', it is virtually impossible to draw it up in an all-inclusive fashion.

It is all about branding. Isn't everything these days? Companies are brands, products are brands, shockingly enough, even people are brands. Perfectly sensible marketing professionals speak earnestly about Ratan Tata's personal brand equity and I wonder if that makes him squirm. Or is he realistic enough to see it from a business leader's perspective: personal brand equity-value addition to the company's stock. True enough in his case. Just like one cannot separate Bill Gates from Microsoft, Ratan is TATA. And TATA is him.

It wasn't always this way in India. Ratan Tata is in a unique position given the Tata legacy. But there are countless other self-styled tycoons who believe business credibility is but a click away. Such 'personalities' walk around flaunting price tags, labels ... brazenly boasting about their net worth ... buying their way into and out of situations. Even a decade ago, such crass conduct would have been frowned upon,

even despised. But in today's far more upfront age of aggressive self-promotion, if a famous person does not cash in on individual equity, he/she is considered dumb ... out of it. Media, of course, has played a key role in promoting personality cults.

In this context, those making the short list for the country's 'Most Valuable People', are the ones with the highest profile. People who have impacted one billion lives directly or indirectly during the past one year. The same people watched by an awestruck nation giving nightly gyaan on television channels, those whose mug shots peddle products ranging from cameras to condoms, those who bring glory to India in the sports arena and most significantly, those who influence policy, those who entertain the masses via music, cinema, television. So long as the average Indian can put a face to the name, the fame game is on. Often, the actual achievements of the person being enthusiastically applauded by the masses is unknown even to those fans clapping away. But that's a matter of detail ... nobody minds.

We love our icons. We worship our heroes. We adore success.

It has often been said that the biggest marketing guru India produced remains Mahatma Gandhi. The man and his message are both alive and well a little more than six decades on. Gandhi gave Indians their spine back. His 'product' was independence. His 'by-product' - self-respect. We have been patiently waiting for the New Mahatma to rescue us in the 21st century. We may have to wait much longer. But, why despair? There are several 'amazing minds' in our midst who influence our lives on a daily basis. These are towering individuals ... well, most of them. For better or worse, we need to identify and acknowledge their contribution in their chosen disciplines.

Two years back the editors at *The Week* did a comprehensive job of putting the list together. M.S. Swaminathan, who will ensure no Indian goes hungry if he can help it, was one of the most important individuals on the list. A nation that accepts the existence of even one hungry stomach in a population of over a billion people is a nation that must hang its head in shame. India cannot afford to boast about a single other achievement so long as there are starvation deaths. For every child who dies of malnutrition, there is collective responsibility involved. Since education cannot be forced down a gullet that is denied access to even clean drinking water, forget edible food, perhaps it is time to link the two most critical programmes of feeding and educating the masses in a more meaningful way. Everything else will fall into place, as it has in other countries that made both a top priority before launching space programmes, putting men on the moon or going nuclear.

India has led a pretty schizophrenic existence throughout its complex history. But never has that been as apparent as it is today. We know - or claim to know - what's 'good for us'. And yet, we seem paralyzed to do something concrete about it. We 'know' religious differences get us nowhere (main reason for the Congress win and BJP defeat in the last election), and yet we are afraid to move against those who foster hatred between communities. Narendra Modi, with his loyal and considerable fan base can be converted into a 'valuable asset' if only his mindset miraculously changes. That is one 'conversion' nobody will object to! He is dynamic and bold. His vision for a prosperous Gujarat has attracted unprecedented investments. And yet, his party received a resounding slap on its face when the voter snubbed them.

Modi as prime minister? Not for a long, long while. Rahul Gandhi's immense appeal to the youth of India can be better

harnessed if he frees himself from the Dynasty and strikes out on his own. Rahul represents Tolerant India - forward-thinking and progressive. Growth-driven and ambitious. His secular stand has won him the hearts of the nation. Rahul could very well emerge as the People's Politician.

So long as we remain passive bystanders and tolerate those fanning communal strife, so long as we silently endorse the merchants of terror, we cannot dream of real progress - the sort that isn't measured by the GDP or Sensex swings. Perhaps the BJP has woken up to the country's real compulsions, which extend well beyond mandir-masjid politics.

Market marshals talk about more transparency. SBI chairman, super brains like Anil Kakodkar, along with the SEBI chairman, control India's financial destiny and positioning in the complex, volatile world of finance. India is still far better off than several developed countries reeling from the economic meltdown. We need sharp strategists to manage our domestic economy during this tricky phase, and we are lucky to have them. But somewhere in this complicated numbers game, we cannot afford to neglect the two issues that directly affect each and every Indian - national security and terrorism. This is where Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's vision and leadership could propel India into a more secure zone. Unfortunately, so far, his contribution has been either too subtle or too sage for it to have made the required difference.

We like to believe Indians have made a fantastic breakthrough in international cinema, thanks to the publicity generated by *Slumdog Millionaire* which is NOT an Indian film to begin with. But what it has done is gift A.R. Rahman's genius to the world. This modest musician has waited a long time for universal recognition. It is now his - Rahman is in a league of his own with no real competition, either here or

overseas. He is a genuine, gilt-edged ‘Valuable’ – self-made and supreme.

Our sports stars largely remain indigenous phenomena, loved by a cricket-mad nation .... And furiously commercialized by their keepers. They are indeed valuable, but it is high time we looked beyond Brand Sachin or Brand Dhoni (a little tarnished at present), and recognized the contribution of those incredible, small town boys from under-privileged, rural homes who have made the country proud on innumerable international occasions. Leander Paes, dubbed a ‘Tennis Statesman’ needs to be acknowledged for his grit and endurance. Right now, however, sports lovers are looking keenly at a new star on the horizon – Saina Nehwal. This plucky 20-year-old has single-handedly revived badminton in India.

The time has definitely come to honour our ‘Most Valuable’ citizens – those anonymous jawans who risk their lives for us, guard our borders, defend us fiercely, and remain the most undervalued citizens of the country. Our grateful ‘salaams’ to our armed forces as we salute India’s unsung heroes.

## M.F. HUSSAIN: THE ORIGINAL LOVER BOY

*'Tell me the truth – are you in love?'*

Hussain saab actually blushed when I asked him this question when I met him in Dubai.

He was showing off his latest 'toy', the super sleek, super sexy Bugatti – low slung, powerful and awe inspiring. Like a lacy thong! But it was easy to tell from his jaunty walk and the gleam in his eyes that it wasn't the car that was inspiring him. It had to be a woman.

He chuckled with delight at the audacity of my question, but did not deny the rumour. Neither did he answer directly. 'It is for you to find out,' he grinned, before loping off for his lunch date. Wow! I said to myself. He was 95-years-at that time. And whosoever this lady is, she is truly blessed. Not because the world famous painter Maqbool Fida Hussain is dating her, not because he'll probably paint her ... immortalize her...but because she will know what it means to be adored by one of the few remaining legendary lover boys left on earth.

Hussain (who passed away a couple of months later on 9 June 2011) was an old fashioned romantic who preferred to woo his women in subtle and refined ways. He expected very little in return, except companionship as and when he required it. But when he was captivated, no force on earth could stop him from winning the lady over.

Many years ago, I'd met him in Delhi, with his steady companion of the time. Sensitive to her status as a married woman, Hussain saab would gallantly spend the bitterly cold winter nights, curled up in the backseat of his tiny Fiat car parked in the compound. That was the old fashioned courtier in him - ever sensitive to the refinements and rules of unconventional and illicit romance (never compromise or embarrass a lady). He abided by the same set of self-imposed principles and scrupulously protected the many ladies who vied to be a part of his entourage.

I always found it remarkable that he managed to find the time and energy to pursue liaisons - dangerous or otherwise. Given his scarily prolific schedule, with ambitious exhibitions lined up for the next five years, most men, a quarter of his age would find it hard to cope with the mundanities of daily life, forget nurturing grand amours. This is exactly what set Hussain apart. He may have been surrounded by a brood of great-grand children, but the quintessential man in him was always vigourously alive.

As if to underline that fact, I watched with some amusement as a prominent socialite came and wrapped herself around him at a soiree in the desert kingdom. She gushed and cooed and demanded to know how much longer she'd have to wait for him! 'I am still fida over you,' she sighed, even as he disentangled himself from her grip and laughed indulgently.

As a die hard devotee of the God of Love, Hussain had no equal. How fortunate he was to continue to experience that magical emotion nine decades into his life with all its agony and ecstasy intact! Age clearly had nothing to do with passion in his case. When I teased him about his latest love interest, Hussain behaved like a love struck collegian, embarrassed but tickled by the situation. As he himself put it so disarmingly: 'Pyaar kiya to darna kya?' As a widower of

many years, he was single and clearly ready to mingle!! How amazing was that?

And yet, it makes me wonder: Hussain was an exception, even amongst men. But has anybody ever come across a 95-year-old woman who is still ‘at it’ (to put it crudely)? And if so, what is the bet she is loaded and that her toy boys get paid for services rendered? What sort of services would those be? I shudder to imagine. Yup. There are double standards even in this regard. Hussain saab became the object of envy. His female counterpart would be instantly converted into an object of ridicule, even pity.

Who says life is fair?

## (DIS) ENCHANTED RUSHDIE

*W*hat would we do without Salman Rushdie, our favourite punching bag for all seasons and reasons?

I love the man. Yup. Even after his rather gauche comments on why women marry. Come on, you big, fat, sulking baby - admit it - you were dumped by a sleek and successful woman, and you can't take it! So, what do you do? You trash all women and reduce them to simpering stereotypes who love playing 'dress up'. Especially if the costume happens to be a wedding dress.

Is that really what you believe Mr. Rushdie? That women in this century are suckers for weddings? That all it takes to get them to the altar is the promise of a fabulous trousseau? Perhaps you know something on the subject considering you have escorted four brides (and still counting?), to that wonderful spot, at various stages of your colourful life. This is just the cutest thing I've ever heard. We must get ex-wife Padma's take on it, but my guess is she's far too busy playing arm candy to her latest sugar daddy to bother about your rather silly views on the subject.

What makes men like Rushdie come up with such sweeping judgements and generalizations? Or are we foolishly giving an off hand, light hearted remark a lot of undue importance? Was Salman being facetious and characteristically wicked? Or reacting in the manner of a thwarted lover getting his own back on a luscious wife who waltzed away with a brand new suitor?

Rushdie has pronounced the death of marriage. He's a fine one to talk! Been there, done that, buddy. What does he care? He claims he's through with that part of his life. I'm putting my money on an announcement in the near future that will unveil the latest Mrs Rushdie to a rather bored world. Salman is a serial husband. Like Elizabeth Taylor was a serial wife. He has liked marriage enough in the past to have gone for it four times. So what has changed all of a sudden? The new lady on his arm looks pretty fine. In fact, she looks a lot like the one who left him! Is she merely dreaming of a fantastic wedding at which she'll wear the most ethereal gown and feel like a fairytale princess? Rushdie would have us believe it's every woman's fantasy to be the glittering star at her own wedding. It's only about the trimmings ... the fuss, the jewels, the guest list! Nothing more. How he downgrades himself by saying that!

I asked a bride-to-be if that was what the whole thing was about. If so, why not host a fake wedding in which she gets the starring role? Why get stuck in a relationship, when what she was supposed to be lustng after was the gauzy veil? She looked at me like I was seriously nuts. I quoted Rushdie. She told me he WAS nuts. That still didn't answer me. Why on earth was this attractive, accomplished young woman opting for marriage, considering she had been living with her partner for over two years?

She wiggled her eyebrows and said she liked the idea of marriage. Really? And was she dreaming of her wedding dress more than of her husband-to-be? She vigourously nodded her head. She was. I painted an exaggerated picture of the elaborate ceremonies, the sangeet (de rigueur, these days, even Goan brides have succumbed), the mehendi, followed by cocktails ... and then tra la la, the nuptials with a lavish reception to follow. Is that why she was getting set to tie the knot? She looked away dreamily and described

her bridal outfit in loving detail. She went on to describe a whole set of ensembles she'd been planning for the big event over the past six months. Then came some more laborious/tedious descriptions of all the related functions and more importantly, what she planned to wear to those. Not once did she mention her bridegroom's attire or talk about their life together as a newly minted couple.

I was beginning to get worried. Her moony expression was reserved for vivid descriptions of her 'amazing' wardrobe. Finally, I asked her what marriage meant to her. Can't say I was caught off guard when she happily (and candidly) replied: 'Clothes!'

Oh my God! Maybe the much-married Salman was right after all. Marriage is for the birds. Free birds. And clothes (not the husband) maketh the modern bride. Tell me I'm wrong, someone.

And that Salman's opinion sucks!

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Oof! And oof, again! Fourth time unlucky?

That's what it looks like for poor Salman Rushdie, going by the buzz doing the international celeb rounds. His latest wife, the luscious and very ambitious, Padma Lakshmi has left her newly-minted Knight, and Sir Salman is heart broken. Boo hoo! When Allah gives with one hand, he sometimes takes away with the other. Just as Rushdie was getting ready to enjoy the next phase in his life, this time as a Knight of the British Empire (surely a cruel joke, worthy of a scathing Rushdie essay - what 'empire', which 'knight'?), boom went his marriage.

'Boom' has played quite a significant role, at least in Padma Lakshmi's life in the fast track. It was the title of a disastrous movie she'd acted in ... the film tanked. And now,

so has the marriage. Salman joins the ranks of serial spouses, who go smoothly from one blazing shaadi to the next, only to emerge none the worse for all the wear and tear that lesser mortals experience. Will this be Rushdie's Last Sigh? I seriously doubt it. At 60-plus, Salman may have propelled himself into a fresh league - men of means, who collect wives like other men collect art works or pocket watches. It works well for both - the pocket watch...errr, trophy wives, and the balding, portly men who acquire them.

In Padma's case, Rushdie may have made a fatal mistake and actually fallen in love with this hot house bloom, known for her steamy performances, on and off camera. Friends insist the man was smitten ... and is therefore heart broken, now that she has waltzed off to pursue other dreams and suitors. Who is the bigger loser? Or is it a win-win situation for both? Because, if nothing else, Rushdie may get another book out of this ill-fated alliance. He will convert his personal loss into a best seller .... And countless fans will identify with the writer's tragedy. What will Padma do? As a Power Couple in New York, they were media darlings, courted and feted at high profile events, at which Padma greedily walked off with goodie bags stuffed with pricey gifts. Gossip had it she cashed in on her status as Mrs Rushdie to demand assorted privileges from event managers, including fancy designer frocks and blingy baubles. If that made her sound like a tacky, money grabbing society hustler, she obviously didn't care. She was far too busy grabbing!!

At a really intimate sit down dinner in their honour (before they married), hosted on the terrace of a five-star hotel in Mumbai, I was seated to Rushdie's left, with Padma right across the table. Guests were horrified by her brattish behaviour that night, particularly when she all but dragged Salman from his chair to give interviews and sound bytes to waiting journos in the lobby. And this, right in the middle

of dinner! It didn't end there. At one stage, she came up to me and purred: 'Would you mind switching places? I hardly get to spend time with my boyfriend ...' I purred back that I most certainly did mind, but her boyfriend was free to move if he so desired. Rushdie stayed put, while Padma stomped off to sulk, making it very clear she was miffed and keen to leave. Salman, being better mannered, didn't insult his hosts and was at his most gracious, charming best till the end. He showed his class .... And she betrayed hers.

To those of us present, Padma came across as a spoilt, selfish, immature creature, desperately seeking attention, while Rushdie displayed the hard-to-miss signs of puppy love. He was attentive and adoring towards the crass, badly behaved woman he'd marry soon after. And then divorce also ....

It was obvious to all but Rushdie that Padma was using him as a stepping stone to international fame. Today, her game plan is there for all to judge. Rushdie has his knighthood, and Padma, several lucrative deals. She no longer needs Rushdie. As for him, well, I wouldn't be at all surprised if Padma's successor is already waiting in the wings, perhaps someone even younger and hotter. Women love titled men in that sort of society. Look at Lady Nadira Naipaul who has not stopped basking in Sir Vidia's glory, insisting on people addressing her by the title, even as her husband squirms uncomfortably. Pity Padma will never be a Lady. Yes, that's a loaded statement. But she may go on to mint money selling the rights to her *Salman Saga*. From *Midnight's Children* to *Midnight's Monsters*, such a sad journey. The ground beneath his feet must indeed be shaking. Poor Moor! What a life ... of never-ending fatwas and troublesome talaqs.

But what the hell ... at least it isn't boring!

## BEATING THE RETREAT ... RAHUL MAHAJAN STYLE!

*N*othing is more telling (or damaging) in cyber space than instant messaging that mocks a celebrity through clever limericks, as it happened in the aftermath of the ludicrous Rahul Mahajan tamasha. The SMS doing the rounds went like this:

What is Rahul Mahajan's Facebook status? It reads: 'Give me sunshine .... Give me rain ... give me another wife... to beat up again'.

This was right after wife No. 2 Skimpy Dimpy went public with her bruises and bumps which she claimed had been inflicted on her by an enraged Rahul who couldn't access the locked keypad of her mobile phone. The 21-year-old Dimpy from Kolkata managed to escape (with her phone, of course) in the dead of the night. And what was the first thing she did? She called a tabloid reporter and posed for pictures. She didn't call the cops and she didn't file charges. Instead, she invested her time wisely by appearing on countless television channels talking about Rahul's brutality and wowing publicly that she was done with him and their farcical marriage (solemnized on television as the finale of a reality show).

That was the cue for wife No. 1 Shweta Singh to join the fray and revisit her own tabloid past in which she too had

gone to town flashing her wounds (no guesses – same man, same tactic).

Next to pop up on the small screen was a former girlfriend who spoke languidly about being battered by this brute. All three women took the tabloid route to air their tales of woe. Just as the media campaign was gathering force to go after the villainous man and pack him off to jail (again!), Skimpy Dimpy did an about turn and went back into his arms after damning the ex and hurling accusations at her about phone stalking her wonderful husband.

All this would pass for amusing gossip if the issues were less serious. Rahul Mahajan sounds like a serial wife beater. A man whose record for domestic violence ought to be taken note of and addressed. As of now, we seem to be watching a carefully orchestrated audition for yet another mega bucks reality show starring the abusive Rahul and his docile wives, plus sexy ex-es.

If we allow as important a subject as domestic violence to be thus reduced to a perverse form of entertainment, we will be committing nothing short of a crime. A crime against millions of disempowered women in our society who are at the receiving end of the most abominable abuse and remain powerless till the bitter end. Not being dubious celebrities, the media ignores their plight, and families watch helplessly from the sidelines, unable to come to their aid due to social/financial pressure.

What is alarming is that the number of abuse cases seems to be climbing, not declining. Women appear to be far more vulnerable today than they were even ten years ago. How come? Take a look at the headlines – stories of stabbing, burning, hitting, battering defenceless wives and girlfriends are on the rise. This nasty phenomenon cuts across class and the easiest targets seem to be young working girls, who are perhaps the prime victims in our cities. Social historians

examining the data may have a different point of view, but I believe our society – men, in particular – are simply not ready to accept independent women. When the frustration levels of such insecure men rise, they resort to the one weapon they know most women cannot shield themselves from – physical violence.

Urban society expects men to respect the pressures on career women and make the required adjustments, given the financial contribution these ladies make to the family kitty. This doesn't happen. Unable to deal with a woman who has a mind and money of her own, some men vent their rage by hitting out ... secure in the knowledge that most times women will lump it (women are such suckers!).

Perhaps we should revisit some of the more in-your-face reality shows that are raking it in by manipulating our pathetic, vicarious thrills seeking selves. Skimpy Dimpy, Payal Rohatgi or even Monica Bedi were nobodies till they attracted attention on these grotesque shows. More fool us for getting conned. 'Aal eez well,' declared a smug Rahul hugging his estranged-for-a-day wife. Oh yeah? Tell that to the marines – better still, announce 'Rahul Ka Samjhauta'.

We deserve nothing better.

## MERE PAAS MAA HAI!

*W*hile the rest of the world mocks men who are seen as mama's boys, we in India generously accept the phenomenon.

It's no big deal if a grown man refuses to let go of his mother's saree pallu. Freud was not an Indian, but he seemed to have understood the Indian psyche far better than so many other foreign sociologists/psychoanalysts. Rahul Gandhi presents a first rate case study of this 'condition'. As did his father Rajiv Gandhi before him. When Rajiv candidly admitted he'd joined politics 'To help Mummy,' some sniggered, while others cooed: 'How sweet!' Rajiv disarmed the entire nation with that confession, as desi mothers warmed to a scenario featuring a self sacrificing son, gallantly putting his own priorities on hold in order to assist a grieving mother, trying to come to terms with the tragic loss of a younger, beloved beta. We adore such emotions and applaud any person who shares the same with us. It's all about loving the family, remember?

Decades later, all those of us who can recall the moment like it happened yesterday, smile at the memory of a handsome airline pilot, father of two kids, changing the course of his own life, only to make his mother happy! If Rajiv sounded like a reluctant debutant, his son Rahul gives the impression of being a reluctant dulha - a bridegroom at a heavily decorated wedding mandap, who isn't keen on putting the jaimala around his bride's neck, or taking the

key saat pheras. But what he is ready to do is keep mama happy!

Italian men are not all that different from their Indian counterparts in this regard. They too worship their moms, and aren't embarrassed to show it. Rahul with his Indo-Italian genes is the perfect example of fusion fundas. He loves Sonia, and Sonia loves him. It remains to be seen whether India will love him with the same passion, but we won't have to wait for too long to find that out. With the next general elections for 2014 (unless there is a mid-term poll), Rahul Baba's test is right round the corner. It may not be a cake walk for the novice, but if the sentimental card is played to the hilt, the Indian voter will possibly make amazing concessions towards the young man.

There are other, equally advantaged young men waiting in the wings as well. But technically, they don't qualify as mama's boys. It is their fathers who have propelled them forward, much like the Bollywood bachchas. Actors like Ranbir Kapoor, who has already been anointed the next generation superstar, all because of his gene pool. Strangely enough, daddy's girls don't attract the same attention, and nor are they given the same status in an unambiguously male-driven film industry. Take the case of a Deepika Padukone, whose film launched on exactly the same day as Ranbir's. Of course, she did get her share of media attention, but not for being Prakash Padukone's darling daughter. Deepika's future fame and fortune were directly linked to the hero of her film, King Khan himself.

Even the spectacular success of the Kapoor sisters, Karisma and Kareena was delinked with their father being a Kapoor. And nobody talks of Esha Deol as Dharmendra's daughter. Or Kaajol as a Mukherjee girl. Had Twinkle Khanna been Rajesh Khanna's son, instead of a daughter, Bollywood would have treated her differently. Does anyone

know the name of Dev Anand's daughter (yes, he has one)? Kamalhasan's gals will never get the same rah rabs, because they are ... well, daughters, not sons.

The future of Pakistan might have been dramatically different had Zulfikar Bhutto produced a son in place of Benazir. Perhaps, another ruthless general would have dominated the region.

The power of a single chromosome can change the destiny of nations. Nobody cares what a great leader's daughters do after him. But aren't we still obsessing over Mahatma Gandhi's sons and wondering what happened to the great legacy? Perhaps the wide acceptance of mama's boys will change a few things. Today, if Rahul Gandhi is to deliver, it will have to be on account of his powerful mother's influence on his life and political beliefs. Rahul will be piggy backing on her position ... cashing in on Brand Sonia. Just as his father did on Indira Gandhi's. This could be a new equation in the making. I entirely approve!

Mama's boys, take a bow. Your time has come. What's the point of having a superwoman as a mother if you can't hang on to her cape and soar skywards?

## MALE BASHING

Please take that (male bashing) at face value.

I am talking about men who get bashed up by women. Literally. It is happening increasingly, and remains a hush hush topic across the world for several obvious reasons.

A man thrashing a woman (in private or public) does not shock or shame society all that much. It happens. It has always happened. People shrug and say: 'Tell us something new... something we don't know.' Well ... here it is: The worm (and the tables) has turned. More and more men are at the receiving end of beatings by women, here in India and abroad. The number of women raising their hands on husbands or lovers is going up, and the only reason nobody is talking about it, is because the men themselves are too ashamed to speak up.

In a fiercely male chauvinistic environment, for any man to admit he is getting a hammering from a woman is like admitting he is a eunuch - for that is what he will be dubbed, even by other members of his family for 'taking it' from a female. No such issues for an abused wife. Most times, it is assumed she has asked for it and deserves to be shown her place before she gets completely out of hand. This is more true in extended families where a husband is called a 'namby pamby' if he is anything less than aggressive - especially if his wife is spirited and independent. Boyfriends who beat girlfriends in urban societies are secretly viewed as

heroes by contemporaries who congratulate them for 'fixing the bitch'. Girlfriends who stupidly flaunt their bruises and black eyes as badges of honour, are also congratulated for 'standing by their man'. Brutality is mistaken for passion. Love demands proof - physical proof. And a broken nose or an arm in a sling has been converted into fashion statements by the monumentally foolish victims.

But now that the era of male bashing is officially here, the picture changes a little. My eyes opened when a male viewer who'd watched me on a recent television show in which I had made a reference to female Bollywood stars being at the receiving end of violence, emailed to share his own nightmarish experience with a particularly hostile wife. He wrote about her attacking him during the early years of his marriage, when their children were babies. The next attack came four years later, when the girls were older and could understand what was going on between their warring parents. The woman refused to let up ... and he refused to hit back (sensible chap). Instead, he walked out of the marriage ... and lost his precious little girls in an ugly custody battle.

Interestingly, this guy is a huge, big teddy bear of a man, not an underweight weakling. He believes strongly that it is wrong to strike anyone, be it another man, woman, child ... even an animal. But those assaults have taken their toll. Today, he is a broken, sad man who has little to look forward to, since his wife took away all he had, including his house. Currently, he spends his time waiting for his girls to meet him over the odd weekend, as per the court schedule. He is confident of their love and support, which is a good thing. Without that, I doubt he'd want to live.

There are many men in his position whose stories are worth documenting. Especially in an age when society at large reserves its compassion almost exclusively for women,

who, no doubt, have been brutalized by men since time immemorial. If the story is getting reversed, it is still an awful story. Simply because violence itself is awful and achieves nothing in the long run. Women, who mistakenly believe they are getting their own back by beating up men, are hurting themselves far more in the bargain. If this particular burly guy refused to retaliate, it shows his wisdom and maturity. Eventually, he will lead a life devoid of hatred and guilt. And his girls will respect him for it. But what of her? Does anybody really give a damn?

I certainly don't!

## THE BULGE AND BEYOND

 If women can ... so can men.

The fashion world is sitting up and giggling over the latest 'breakthrough' in men's wear - the bulge pants! Not only is the crotch padded up to present a more enhanced appearance, there is a version that also lifts up a sagging butt and makes the wearer feel like John Abraham in Yash Johar's 2008 film *Dostana* directed by Tarun Mansukhani. Those expressing reservations over the issue (mainly, conservative idiots) are being reminded that such tricks are as old as the hills. From cod pieces worn by Victorian gentlemen to bananas stuffed into underpants by rock stars like Mick Jagger, men have always tried to draw attention to what's between their legs. Perhaps to distract from what's between their ears.

Women have done the same with their obsession with breasts ... what God didn't provide, a surgeon today is more than happy to oblige. And in Raakhi Sawant's famous words: 'Joh dikhta hai, woh bikta hai.' In other words, if you don't have it, but still want to flaunt it, go right ahead with a l'il help from friendly, neighbourhood doctors and designers.

Reports indicate the newly launched Bulge Pants are flying off the shelves. Men in Britain are rushing to the mass market store that has introduced them this season, while wives and girlfriends are also gifting these sexy trousers to their guys. Women's lingerie has never shied away from

promoting 'uplifts'. That engineering marvel known as the 'Wonderbra' has saved countless ladies from the shame of not possessing the prerequisites to pull off a daring décolleté gown. With smart underwiring and the required stuffing, even for the most sagging breast-challenged woman can convincingly appear well-endowed in public - the bra is that fantastically structured.

Men have been less neurotic about pumping up their equipment, but in today's competitive zamana all that is rapidly changing. Some of you may recall David Beckham's ad for Armani briefs which had brought traffic to a halt when it debuted as a gigantic billboard in New York. There were dozens of articles in the press wondering about the err ... family jewels. Was David really and truly that blessed? Were his best assets all his? Or were they photo-shopped? Only his wife knew for sure! And trust Posh Beckham to issue a bold statement to disbelievers, assuring them it really was David all the way! And wasn't she one lucky woman to enjoy such an incomparable gift? A pity those assets didn't help Beckham too much as a star footballer in America, but her testimony did win him several new fans (of both genders) to say nothing of fresh advertising deals. However, a few prudish international destinations did tone down David's box in the hoardings, so as not to send locals into a collective sexual frenzy leading to road accidents!

In India, we continue to feign shock and awe when male models on the ramp strut their stuff in nothing more modest than skimpy inner wear worn as outer wear. Crudely put - men in chaddis somehow raise more eyebrows than women in bikinis. Women are 'allowed' to pour out of their garments and wardrobe malfunctions don't really shock anybody (a nipple here, a nipple there ... big deal!) any more. But look at what happened to Johnny Boy when he pulled down the waist band of his bright yellow trunks to show three inches

of - oh no - not what you are fantasizing. We are talking buttocks. Since that seminal cinematic moment when desi heroes decided to objectify themselves and compete with their heroines for skin display, eye candy awards, nothing has been the same again.

This season's pants are telling their own story. The Bodymax collection launched by Marks & Spencer is making the most outrageous promises that claim a 38 per cent visual enhancement of a man's 'integral shelf' (don't you just love that crazy description?). M&S also claim these pants deliver 'real results'. How?

After 'Choli ke peechay kya hai ...' some canny Bollywood type is bound to compose a male version that goes, 'Patloon ke peechay kya hai...?'

In the interests of gender equality ... why not?

## GANDHIJI – A ‘GAY’ ICON? WHY NOT?

*C*ome on, India. Grow up!

If the Great Soul was indeed attracted to another man, is that so hard to accept or understand? Which century are we living in? I am writing this on 1 April – the April Fool’s Day. And we are looking like the biggest fools on earth right now. One can expect bachelor boy Narendra Modi to instantly cash in on the ‘sentiments’ of the people of his state and ban the controversial book after dubbing it ‘perverse’. Paradoxically enough, those same people are free to visit the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad and read those ‘perverse’ letters for themselves. I wonder how many people from Modi’s city bother to go to the ashram in the first place, forget about examining the many Gandhiji volumes that it houses?

Yes, the same archival material was used by the author (Joseph Levyveld) for the book *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India*. The biggest slap in the face has come from Gandhiji’s own – his grandson Rajmohan Gandhi, and great-grandson Tushar Gandhi, both of whom have described the ban as ‘un-Gandhian.’ Any sensible policy maker would let it go at that. And chances are the book will find its own level, its own takers and detractors. As should happen in a democracy. By attempting to suppress it, the one fallout will be just this: *Great Soul* will register even greater sales!

Censorship is always but always counter-productive - the more you suppress, the higher the curiosity. We saw that with the American professor and writer James Laine's book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* on the 17th century Maratha ruler (thank you Supreme Court, for showing better sense than the government of Maharashtra). Perhaps we shall see the same happening with this book as well. But, hello! Who can think of reading a red hot book, when the collective focus of the country is on so many other events, one overtaking the other.

Let's face it - what's the single most startling disclosure in the book? That the author has claimed our revered Mahatma (and perhaps the world's most famous, self-declared celibate), had a long term relationship with a German-Jewish architect and body builder called Hermann Kallenbach? Which makes Kallenbach, not Gandhi's wife Kasturba, the great love of his life! So? Since this 'juicy' tidbit was carried in nearly all the mainstream newspapers in India, it has been met with a rather tepid reaction that may surprise the more conservative elements of our society.

'Really? Interesting!' said a slightly bored 20-year-old reading the news, before turning away. That was it. No rioting on the streets. No demand to ban the book. No baying for Lelyveld's blood. We have grown up! That is the best news ever!

Today, homosexuality is no longer a taboo subject and is out there along with other aspects of sex. Whether Gandhiji's subsequent 'experiments' with various truths were a part of his mission to come to terms with his own inclinations will remain a topic for future historians to tackle. But according to this well-researched book (Joseph has based his work on material that is easily accessible, and quotes from *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* - supplementary volume 5 from the archives at the Sabarmati

Ashram in Ahmedabad), there are several controversial nuggets that suggest Gandhiji was indeed in a relationship of sorts with Kallenbach, with whom he shared a home for two years. The author quotes from one of Gandhiji's letters to Hermann, in which the Mahatma confesses: 'How completely you have taken possession of my body. This is slavery with a vengeance.'

A reader is free to interpret those passionate lines any which way, and even disregard sexual implications when Gandhiji jokingly refers to himself as 'Upper House' and Kallenbach as 'Lower House'.

I have yet to read the book, but I would think an author with such impressive credentials would have done his homework scrupulously before going into print. In any case, Gandhiji's sexuality has always been a subject of such complexity and debate that one more tome shouldn't matter. Unless, of course, some over zealous politician with nothing better to do, decides to make an issue out of it. Whether the Mahatma preferred men over women is nobody's business but his.

In any case we, in India have such idiotic standards when it comes to sex. If Gandhiji wrote: 'I cannot imagine a thing as ugly as the intercourse of men and women,' he is entitled to his opinion. So, it's best we keep scholars, intellectuals and academics out of this hot potato. And please, let's also leave out his great-grand children, assorted grand-nephews, nieces and other descendants, too. Nobody can possibly speak on behalf of the Mahatma and 'clarify' anything. It's not necessary, either!

There is this book, and, no doubt, there will be many more in the future. Nothing can take away from Gandhiji's greatness, least of all his love for another man. Perhaps it will drive young Indians to read more about the man who altered their destiny and gave India freedom. It's amusing to

read political scientist and Gandhian scholar Tridip Suhrud's 'defence' of the Mahatma, in which he says: 'In the late 19th and early 20th century, men addressed each other in a way that can be construed now as lovers.' Now that's pretty twee. And frankly, who needs such justifications? Suhrud also explains that the two had 'a deep bond that borders on attraction of the platonic kind.' Okay, buddy. If you say so...

Let us hope whatever it was that Gandhiji shared with Kallenbach did indeed bring a lot of joy and fulfillment to both their lives.

Gandhiji as a Gay Icon? Why not? I think that's pretty cool!



*Five*

## AAM AADMI VERSUS THOSE IN POWER

## RASCALAM OF ALL RASCALAMS

*Bobbitt* all these rascalams, I say! Too many of them floating around the world doing bad-bad things to good-good women.

Look at that fellow Dominique Kahn-Strauss (does he waltz, or what?). Couldn't keep his business inside his pants! Aiyoooo! So much shame he is bringing to his family ... all his wives and children. Had the New York Police Department not acted swiftly, the mighty Kahn-Strauss (described as a 'super brain' by admirers), credited with having steered the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through critical times, would have been back in France, possibly to attack some more vulnerable women. From all accounts, the man is a maniac who has blatantly misbehaved with several women in the past, including Tristiane Banon the beautiful god-daughter of his second wife. Tristiane, a 31-year-old writer, claimed through her lawyer that she had been sexually assaulted by Kahn-Strauss when she had gone to interview him as a trainee journalist in 2007. Surprisingly, it was Tristiane's mother, a politician herself, who had dissuaded the young journo from filing charges!

Now the man has no face to show in public. And he is coming from such a top class background, that to. Just think - how many people become IMF chiefs? You are knowing anyone? I am not knowing. What a powerful job controlling which country to give how much money to and

all that. Presidents and prime ministers of countries come with begging bowl to his door. And he simply doesn't care! I ask you, Sir, when you are attacking that poor servant girl, sorry, chamber maid, are you not behaving same-to-same as our film star Shiney Ahuja? Proper thinking and good brain went where at that time? Same question we are asking Shiney - see what happened to him? Jail and all. Still his wife Anupam Pandey is standing by him. Your wife also, no? But yours is third or fourth wife. Poor Shiney only has one - he may not get another after this.

Agreed, you are out now with charges dropped, but you were also in jail, my friend! But, believe me foreign jails are far, far better than Indian jails. You must be getting good food - meat, chicken, fish and all that. Bed to sleep on. Many, many Indians won't mind being in American jails for that reason only. Better to eat in a prison than starve outside and on top of that have to listen to big-big lectures about freedom and how great India is because of that freedom. All useless talk, I say. First, keep stomach filled, then enjoy fruits of freedom.

Okay, some things we are fully knowing and understanding about your type of problem. It is also happening in this part of the world, baba ... how men can be different-different from place to place? Anatomy same, brain same, thinking same. See a woman - and jump on her. If she is working for you, then, no problem. Like you can use laptop anytime, she also can be used anytime. Why for pretend to be a sadhu, all holy and pure, when the truth is fully known to all? But even with this much understanding, it is not proper for you to have done what you did in that costly hotel room. Coming out nanga in front of stranger-lady? Then forcing her to do all that chhee chhee stuff! Not thinking for one minute of your wife and children before doing badmaashi! We call such men total idiots in India.

Why? Because smart men know when to do all this physical stuff and when not to. Arrey baba - you could not wait or what? You certainly lived up to an old adage - there's no fool like an old fool. As more and more sleaze emerged about you (described by one victim as a 'rutting chimpanzee'), one thing became abundantly clear - your much-admired brain was not in its prescribed place (inside the skull), but stuck between your legs.

Then you said it is Nicolas Sarkozy's fault. Where is Sarkozy in all this scandal nonsense? He was busy making his beautiful wife Carla Bruni pregnant, who has now given birth to a healthy baby girl. Timing for conceiving was also first class. Election baby is good for vote catching. Sarkozy is a smart chap, that way. France people like to know that their presidents are manly fellows capable of keeping woman happy in the bedroom. Several women, several bedrooms. All French presidents are like that only! One mistress here ... another one there ... two-three wives in between. Nothing new. You should have waited to become the president of France first ... then you could have raped or whatever you call it, women right and left, without a care in the world.

Your wife - what is her good name? Haan, Annie, no? She has said politicians must know how to seduce. Lucky man, you are! How many wives are so understanding? So far, at least, Annie is like Shiney's wife, not like Hollywood actor Arnie's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) wife. Look at that uppity Maria Shriver and how she is acting! That too after twenty-five years of marriage. Women are also similar types about such matters. I think so they feel jealous. After that they feel they must get badla. No need for badla-wadla ... no point. Arnie and you can have a frank talk about this sex matter. Also, invite that golf player Tiger Woods for a discussion. See, all three of you are big shots - famous, rich, influential. Still you got into trouble in America.

That way, Italian people are not so strict. See how they gave so many chances to their former prime minister! Silvio Berlusconi is a rascalam of all rascalams. He boasts openly about those small-small girls he paid so much money for bunga bunga business. Nobody bothering too much for that in Rome, do as the Romans do, they are saying. He did not go to jail. But you did!

Tch, tch, tch! Everything khallas for you, now. Naukri gone, friends gone, future gone. That means, life also gone. You are saying world hates you because you are a Jew. American public saying you are racist. Poor maid was saying one thing one day another thing next day. God knows how many more women will now start telling the whole world that you raped them here and there - in the office, in the car park, in an elevator, maybe even in an airplane bathroom. How you will keep your izzat and show face to family?

In India, we believe in karma. Maybe you did many sins in last life? Many more in this life also. Now your only hope is for your next life. Now that you are out of jail at least do one thing, boss - keep your business out of sight. Or else, bheja gaya, aur 'woh' bhi! Bobbitt ka naam suna hai aapne? Women are saying loudly-loudly that is what men like you deserve.

Mind it!

## BANKERS OR BONKERS?

*T*here was a time, long, long ago, when my parents were naïve enough to go in search of a suitable boy for their youngest daughter (me!).

First preference? A Saraswat Brahmin, IAS officer. Second? A Saraswat Brahmin doctor or engineer. There was no third option. Clearly, their misguided attempts failed totally. And they reconciled themselves to supporting a wicked, no-good beti who refused to ‘obey’, and insisted on cutting her own hair (the famous ‘Sadhana Fringe’ - a rage at the time). But even in their desperation and through those long months of utter despair ('our daughter, the spinster'), one thing they were completely clear about: no bankers for their fourth child. I guess my parents were a whole lot smarter than I gave them credit for. I mean ... look at what's going on.

From Rajat Gupta (and wait till you hear juicier stories about this player - they are out there and about to go public), to DKS and then this Egyptian chap, Mahmoud Abdel Salam Omar, who was arrested after assaulting - you've guessed it - a maid, during his stay at the posh 'Pierre' in New York. Oofff! What's with this 'Bonk and be damned' brigade? Makes me sigh: Achcha bhai, parents ke objection mein kuch toh logic tha. One can't say about the bad behaviour displayed by these banker types - it's only about the money, honey. Money, especially other people's money, is indeed super sexy. But a few of these horny toads

obviously equate money with absolute power - the kind that says you can jump on the first female you find, and she should feel honoured to be 'sexually abused, assaulted, touched, imprisoned and harassed' (these are the charges against the man from Alexandria, who was the chairman of the Egyptian American Bank) by such a creature. There are several similar sleaze balls in Indian banking as well ... and God help us if some of our five star hotel employees decide to squeal and tell all some day. Vat laga dengey!

For one, most people do not know the distinction between running a bank and owning one. Sure, both jobs require fiscal astuteness, but come on, guys, it's just another job. Someone's got to do it! For years and years, bankers were seen as big fat bores. Especially, by women. Dull, discreet and deadly. A good banker was meant to be seen but not heard. Talking about cracking deals and other equally crass issues was considered totally infra dig if not outright embarrassing. Good bankers stayed below the radar, were determinedly low profile and certainly didn't party with the swish set (yup, the same set they discreetly financed). Top bankers were shadowy figures who went about their wheeling and dealing with the stealth of ace robbers. It was a vital part of their job description to confuse everybody into thinking they were doing something impossibly profound and hard to fathom, when in fact, they were doing exactly what Shylock did - scalping everybody. Taking money from this one and passing it on to that one, while making a whopping commission for the bank. In the process, they also gave themselves humungous bonuses and generally lived like kings. Often, far better than the impoverished maharajahs whose palaces they happily attached for non-payment of dues.

As numbers (and ambition) grew, our extra-smart, homegrown bankers were poached by monster banks

worldwide. And those same fellows who used to sneak around corners clad in boring brown (yes, brown!) polyester suits and synthetic striped ties, were suddenly all over the place dressed by Armani/Tom Ford, posing and preening away on the covers of global business magazines, thinking they were Gordon Gekko himself. As a creed, 'Greed is Good' worked for most of them. Till a few were caught with their hands in the cookie jar, or worse, with their pants down.

The World Bankwallahs were in a league of their own. They formed the super elite Big Boys' Club, and believed they actually held the keys of the kingdom in their hot little paws. These guys had the power! They knew it. They flaunted it. They used it. And still do. Nobody knows their asli agenda. The World Bank operates like an ancient secret society where the only thing that matters is the CYA mantra - Cover Your Ass. The people who work for the World Bank are like the commandos we saw in action during the Mumbai terror attacks of 26 November 2008. Their identities are not always revealed. Nor are their agendas. But we know they are out there 'doing something important'. What that is, does not matter. It's just one of those reassuring illusions we hang on to when most of us don't know any better.

The World Bank gang has the best time of all. They live like royalty wherever they are posted. Their spouses specialize in swiping credit cards. Their kids enjoy amazing privileges and get into Ivy League schools effortlessly. Scandals associated with this bunch, are managed with minimum collateral damage. As lifestyles go, theirs are deluxe. Check this out - they jet around the globe travelling first class, attending power events, seated at the high table with presidents and prime ministers. Errr, it is said they buy and sell countries, too. Their pampered partners talk in lofty terms about acquiring havelis in Rajasthan, the way others

talk about buying a Hyundai. Why then would anybody be foolish enough to throw away such astonishing perks ... all because of an uncontrollable pecker? It's a question worth asking some of our smarty pants. Same fellows who have given Indian business and Indian banking such a bad name internationally.

One only hopes (izzat ke vaastey) their bonking prowess remains far superior to their banking skills!

## SHARAM KARO, BHAI, SHARAM KARO

*Y*up. It happened. Another (the 19th) terror attack on the capital in fifteen years.

How many died? Who knows. By the time someone could take the trouble to total it all up, India had moved on (24 hours later, most people already had), and those who don't live in Delhi just shrugged and talked about 'intelligence failure', 'security lapses', 'crisis in leadership'. Out-of-work movie stars tweeted away, offering prayers and condolences, and television anchors with grim faces attempted to grill the usual suspects, embarrass a few and reprimand the rest. There it remained. Manmohan Tauji did tut tut - 'It's a long war' and beseeched the 'people of India to stand united', remain 'calm'. Chidambaram Chhacha issued some more somber sounding statements (does he just recycle them from a master list?). And that took care of the situation ... till the next blast ... and the next. And till such time as every Wednesday will make Indians fear it may be another black one.

There is something called immunity. Just as cockroaches, dog ticks, certain strains of bacteria stop responding to powerful drugs and pest control chemicals, human beings too develop a resistance to acts of terrorism. How many times can we go 'hai hai' and beat our breasts? Those responsible for the safety and security of the nation count on just that. This ain't America, boss. Nor is it Australia.

Or any other country that has declared zero tolerance for terrorists. Here, we keep those accused and convicted of terror attacks in conditions that are denied to a majority of God-fearing, law-abiding citizens. Even the Sri Lankan assassins of a former prime minister have been spared from the gallows so far. Parliament attack convict Afzal Guru? Let's not even go there! Ditto for Pakistan gunman Ajmal Amir Kasab. So long as we play these dangerous political games in a clumsy attempt to prove something dubious to the world ('Look guys! We are a democracy. Please be impressed.'), we shall have to resign ourselves to living with terror. And slippery, weak politicians, whose sole objective in life is to hang on to their kursis and make money.

What does the average Joe do in such a desperate situation? I once received a really dumb email with a request to stand in silence and pray for the dead. Respecting the memory of those innocent people who were blown to bits on 7 September 2011, is one thing. But the pointlessness of such chain mails makes me see red. There was another email which expressed outrage at the fact that not a single politician in the last five years was directly affected by terrorist attacks. It was as if the chattering classes would have felt a little better had a couple of netas lost their limbs or lives in similar attacks. This is just such a childish and churlish reaction! But one can understand where it's coming from.

There is so much repressed rage against the ruling class right now, that it would somehow appease the masses if those lofty politicos enjoying z-category protection at tax payers' expense were as vulnerable as that poor Pawan Jaswal from Gurgaon who had come to the Delhi High Court to attend a hearing on his employer's case and was instantly killed. Increasingly, affected people are vociferously articulating their anger and contempt for leaders as was evident when

Rahul Gandhi was heckled when he showed up at Delhi's Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. This is the bold writing on the wall that politicians need to pay close attention to. It indicates a shift in people's attitude towards those in power. So far, the high and mighty have been insulated from such an outrage because the cowering masses have grown accustomed to treating VIPs like 'maap baap', bowing and scraping in their presence.

But, watch out! Nobody is likely to be spared in future, least of all bechara Manmohan Singh, whose kamzor position at present is encouraging dissidents to shout him down, when he trots out platitudes like, 'Co-operation, not accusation, is the need of the hour.' Try saying that to 21-year-old victim Amanpreet Singh Jolly's grieving father. Or to the wife of 54-year-old Vinod Jaiswal, who was blissfully oblivious she'd been widowed till much after 4.30 p.m. when the sad news was finally broken to her by Ashok, Vinod's brother. Unfortunately, not too many people remember these tragic stories today. Not even the media.

The government cannot hope to get away with alibis and excuses each time the nation is shattered by demonic acts of terror. The buck does stop with those in power. It is the primary duty of our elected representatives to protect lives of citizens. People don't care if it is the LeT hand, or Harkat, IM or some other terror group's 'foot' that's responsible for the Delhi High Court attack. Imagine, 68 per cent of people polled blamed the blast on 'the lack of a political will to tackle terrorism'.

Sharam karo, bhai, sharam karo. The mood of the nation is belligerent. Public anger is as lethal, as dangerous as an IED. All that's required is a trigger. And such a symbolic blast can cause far greater damage than anything placed in an abandoned suitcase.

Everytime it happens, it's 'champi' time for politicians. The smart thing to do would be to at least keep shut and get to work!

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And now look at Mumbai! Horror of horrors! Mumbaikars actually stayed away from work, the morning after the Mumbai bomb blasts in July last. Yup, those devastating ones that ripped out the city's gut.

In case you are saying: 'Oh really? How come? We always thought nothing stopped the people of Mumbai from going to work ... not even bomb blasts,' you'd be spot on. Nothing does! The only reason for mass absenteeism the next morning was simple - water logging on train tracks! Imagine the irony of it all. Hundreds of commuters remained absent from work, not out of a sense of fear that there could be more blasts, but because they were stranded at suburban stations. Had it been a clear day, you bet downtown offices would have been as crammed as always.

That's Mumbai. Never say die! Even when death stares you in the face. As death did on the 13th of July when three blasts exploded in crowded areas during peak hours. Over 20 people were killed in approximately 12 minutes. Twenty, 21 or 200 ... does it really matter? We in Mumbai are supposed to smile philosophically and 'move on'. Why? Because we are 'so resilient'. Because we 'must work'. Because the 'spirit of Mumbai' is so amazing. All of this is accurate. But it is of zero comfort. We have reached a stage where the old anger has been replaced by revulsion. We watch the faces of politicians preaching across channels, advising us to 'stay calm'. And we want to puke.

Contempt for authority is a dangerous tool, especially in democracies. The time has come for citizens to demonstrate

their own asli people power and demand answers from those in authority. This has happened across the Arab world, and it can (should!) happen here. The writing is on the wall. Ignore the hitherto suppressed wrath and ire of the people of this metropolis, and invite terrible retribution. An Arab Spring could rapidly turn into a Mumbai Monsoon, with a raging flood of protests that could flatten those who continue to mete out shabby treatment to the citizens of the City of Gold.

As always, it was the man and woman on the street who rose to the challenge and mobilized help within minutes of the blasts. Social networking sites were over loaded with posts and tweets offering any and every kind of assistance. The generosity, the spontaneity of several online communities, was not just commendable, but stupendous. People set up help lines, info lines, hot lines, and reached out to complete strangers without the slightest hesitation. Whether it was medical help or car rides, places to crash out for the night or hot meals for the hungry, people were going the extra mile to comfort fellow citizens.

Contrast this outpouring of genuine care to the total indifference of netas like R.R. Patil, Maharashtra's notorious home minister, who was largely untraceable and invisible post-blasts. Fortunately, the new bloke, Prithviraj Chavan did show up at the affected sites to speak briefly to the media. But what did the chief minister say? Oh ... he trotted out predictable platitudes about terrorists striking at the heart of India etc. Having said his piece, he was bundled into a waiting car and that was it. But at least he had the brains to turn up. Contrast his gesture with Vilasrao Deshmukh's (who can forget his casual stroll through the corridors of Mumbai's bombed out Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, after 26/11 accompanied by his movie star son and a dodgy film maker?).

And let me not forget our cops. This time they arrived swiftly enough, swinging their lathis and swaggering around the carnage, looking suitably grim. The top cop assumed an air of 'I mean business' but failed to convince anybody that he indeed did. After an unimpressive walkabout, the internet was flooded with sardonic comments about these keepers of the city's law and order, notably by a blogger called Pranav Gandhi who described R.R. Patil's job as 'the best job in the world' (no responsibility, no work ... but a secure berth in the cabinet, that too with the same portfolio!).

I am convinced there is something seriously wrong with us, the people of Mumbai. We are the 'most attacked' city on earth ... and we accept this dubious 'honour' passively, like it is a part of our collective destiny to be frequently bombed. This is not stoicism, it is not resignation, and it most certainly isn't resilience (how I hate that word). So what is it? I'd call it stupidity. Plain stupidity. We think we are being heroic when we react like this when, in fact, we are being foolish. Utterly foolish. We do nothing about this sorry state of affairs and carry on like blasts are 'normal'. Like blasts 'happen'. Like we are supposed to sit back and accept attacks, chanting 'Hey, this is Mumbai!' It is because of this very idiotic attitude that terrorists love us! They can't get enough of the city. And they are going to keep bombing us. You know why? Because they can. While we brag: 'Mumbai rocks!'

People are so jealous of us. Look at our glittering city. Look at our billionaires. Look at the gold and diamonds in our stores! Come on, who wouldn't want a piece of this action? 'Who wouldn't want to destroy Mumbai?', they attack!

Yes, we really are that dumb. We refuse to hold anybody responsible. We refuse to make anybody answerable. We refuse to protest. What do we do instead? We show off!

We get back to business as usual within hours of an attack and boast about it to the world. As if it's something to be deliriously proud of. But hello! The facts are slightly different. Mumbai is attacked over and over again for the simple reason that it is POSSIBLE! It is ridiculously easy. Anybody can walk in with a couple of bombs and trigger them off - no problem. It can happen tomorrow morning ... even tonight. That's how exposed and vulnerable Mumbai remains. Frankly, we are asking for it. We deserve it.

If that sounds harsh - sorry! It's the truth. The terrorists know this, too. They take advantage of Mumbai's nakedness. They laugh. They mock. Nobody is in charge here - not even the cops ... so long as the city's VVIPs are well protected, the aam Aadmi doesn't matter. The bad guys are well aware of Mumbai's weaknesses, of Mumbai's impotence, it's powerlessness to deal with calamities, emergencies, crises. Even after this Black Wednesday, we continue to grin, shrug and say: 'Zindagi na Milegi Dobara'.

Party on, guys! Tomorrow is another day ... if it comes!

## WHEN NEWS ANCHORS BECOME THE NEWS

*We* start thinking of them as our best friends. That's the power of television.

More than most characters in even the most popular of soap operas, it is news anchors who crawl into our lives and stay there. We believe them, trust them, fall in love with them. They are the people who tell us what to think, what to do, what to feel. That is, if they are good at their jobs. And you don't get to anchor news or interview hot shots if you aren't bloody good at what you do.

I was thinking about this in a vague, distracted sort of way when I watched Barkha Dutt interviewing the Congress general secretary, Digvijay Singh some time back. No matter what she asked him, the man would giggle away, laugh uproariously, and generally carry on like a smitten schoolboy. When he wasn't actively flirting with Barkha on camera, he was ogling her blatantly. Well, Barkha is not known for her bashfulness either. She was making eyes, cracking jokes and flirting right back! Excellent television, if you ask me. Some may call this tactic 'establishing a rapport with the subject' (oh yeah?), but most viewers would describe this as the most public form of courtship - intentional or otherwise.

This is a worldwide phenomenon. Larry King, who recently hung up his colourful suspenders, was another television personality who went flat out to woo his interviewees. In

the bargain, he managed to get the unlikeliest celebs on his show to say the darndest of things. Ditto for Jay Leno, who often blushed and collapsed in a heap of embarrassment (real or fake) when a particularly fetching female guest came on too strong.

Unfortunately in India, most of our top male anchors refuse to do anything more than growl at guests. Sometimes (but all too rarely) Karan Thapar lets up just a little and cracks a genuine smile and forgets to sneer. But most of the time, his trademark smirk stays fixed. Arnab Goswami remains determinedly stony faced, regardless of who his nightly panelists are. He is focused and forthright, sparing no one. There is no such thing as a ‘charm offensive’ in his book – not even in the larger interests of getting more dope for the all too frequent ‘Breaking News’.

There was a time when half the women of this country (well, those of us who belong to a certain vintage) had a major crush on Prannoy Roy. He made the budget and elections analyses super sexy with his suave manner and reassuring air. Never mind that the data and statistical overload went above our heads. We watched a handsome, bearded man reeling off numbers in a bedroom voice ... and swooned. There are enough fans of Rajdeep Sardesai out there who will gladly vouch for his sex appeal. He knows exactly how to woo his constituency, adopting the manner of a rogue boy friend and using raw Salman Khan techniques. This alpha male approach obviously has its takers going by his popularity.

In the old Doordarshan days, people of my father’s generation were fida over a news reader called Salma (the lady who wore a gigantic chrysanthemum or dahlia over one ear). I remember how avidly he used to hang on to every word she uttered, and rave over the way she draped her saree pallav, much to my mother’s annoyance. Salma was

very much a fantasy woman for senior citizens. Smita Patil came later and was rapidly snapped up by Bollywood.

There is something irresistible and alluring about the men and women we watch nightly in the privacy of our bedrooms. They become such an intrinsic part of our lives; we miss them when they aren't around. I recall Rajat Sharma telling me candidly that his biggest high was to get recognized at airports and sign autographs. He was being honest. The truth is, we do engage with television anchors in a very intense sort of way. Their livelihood depends on the credibility they establish. And our faith in what they are saying depends on how convincingly they put it across. It is all make believe and word play. Anchors are performers, too. Just like discounted movie stars. Only difference being anchors get to write their own scripts, direct themselves, perform live with no scope for retakes, and keep their fingers crossed they don't mess up big time in front of gigantic audiences.

It's a tough job. But someone's got to do it.



*Six*

## THE ONES THAT INFLUENCE

## LAME DUCK PRIME MINISTER

*Ph*, Oh - sizzling tennis over our prime minister's tepid talk show? Ummm ... no contest.

Tennis has dum. Tennis is about pure, unadulterated testosterone when two beefcakes in shorts sweat it out on a packed Centre Court. How can poor Manmohanji compete with those hunks for eyeballs? Somehow, this whole new wooing game ... reaching out to the media and what not, smacked of damage control at its clumsiest. A weekly gup shup with hard boiled, hand-picked 'cynics' from the media last June? Why? What for? Was this ploy a hollow PR exercise ... or a panic attack?

Let's face it: our Manmohan Singh is a mumbler. He is not the world's best communicator. After keeping mum for seven years (three measly interactions with the detested scribe-tribe during this period) the prime minister's sudden decision to go a-courtin sounded suspicious and disingenuous. Unless, there was a bigger agenda, of course. It may have been a well thought out strategy to influence and manipulate voters before the next elections. What better than a monopoly over a potent and powerful medium like television to air the party's ambitions? To define and defend policies. To test the waters before a big announcement. This can be dangerous. Especially in a country that calls itself a democracy.

I wondered why our affable Manmohanji trundled along happily all this while without bothering to clarify a single issue - well, at least to the satisfaction of critics. Now he wants to alter the uneasy equation and meet the very same 'accusers, prosecutors and judges' on a regular basis. Maha mistake, my friend. Definitely something kaala in the lentils. Or the man who insists he isn't a lame duck ('langda batak' to you) was under pressure from you-know-who to go out there and do the dirty job others are shying away from. Poor guy. It can't be much fun having to provide explanations for any and every lapse, especially when the buck stops with someone else - the very same person who he sweetly says is 'not an obstacle'!

Manmohan Singh sounded heartbreakingly like a hen-pecked husband who has his wife's permission to admit as much in public! Now, if instead of Singh, UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi had taken the bold step of participating in such a dialogue on national television, believe me, Wimbledon or no Wimbledon (Jo-Wilfried Tsonga could have done the full monty after thrashing Roger Federer for all we care), India would have come to a stop and heard the lady out. That's never going to happen - and everybody knows it. So, we had to settle for a person who is not really in the best position to respond to even a simple question like: 'How's the weather up there?' Given the state of paranoia, chances are such a query would be over-analyzed for hidden motives and responded to by a super guarded: 'Depends what you mean by "weather" and "up there"..."'

Let's be honest - what did our man end up saying that we don't know? Zilch. He sounded defensive and evasive when he blamed the Opposition for virtually all the failings of the government led by him. Though, perhaps, one needs to redefine 'led'. According to the prime minister it's all

about propaganda. Everything. Corruption included. He said he was ready to take full responsibility 'for all the bad things this government has done.'

But how? It sounds heroic and noble, but he knows and everybody knows it amounts to nothing in real terms. If he is playing the martyrdom card, even that will backfire. One expects a real leader to assume real responsibility. But Manmohan Singh sounded apologetic ... more like a fall guy, left with no alternative but to take the flack. The time to project a more assertive image was seven years ago, not now. The UPA show is virtually over. What's was the point of sabre rattling and baring teeth at this late stage? Sorry, but there were no takers for the prime minister's newest initiative. It was little like a reality show that appears fully fixed. Or a recycled talk show that is so embarrassingly awkward, one prays for the host's safety.

All talk of stepping down and letting Rahul Gandhi take his vacated kursi sounds phony, even if the voice and body lingo are artificially pumped up to display a newly acquired bravado. Manmohan Singh is no Rafael Nadal. Neither is Rahul Baba. I mean someone who actually means business, goes ahead and actions plans. What we got to hear on the television show was some meaningless mewling about corruption having 'caught the imagination' of the people. No kidding! Really! So ... like corruption is only about 'catching the imagination'... like the latest book, movie or television show? The prime minister went on to say his government would 'deal with it.' Sure, bro. How? When? Tell us! We are still waiting!

We, the people of India, are not gullible school children who have to be reminded that our prime minister does not possess a 'magic wand'. Hell ya ... we know that! You ain't Cindrella's fairy god mother! And nobody expects 'instant solutions' either. But, please Sir, start by offering one -

just one - solution. Take your pick from the vast array of problems waiting for solutions - from the 2G, CWG and all the other 'Ji's' that keep popping up. Today's janata is pretty clued in, and talking in circles does not fool the aam aadmi. This approach may have worked thirty years ago, when our attitude towards netas was one of reverence. Big mistake! We didn't know better back then.

But, hello! Today, we do. Public opinion spares nobody and nothing. If anything, our journalists are a bit too polite, well mannered and reverential. Try pulling off such a farce anywhere else in the world. Try talking to those bulldog editors in Britain, America, Australia, Canada, France or Germany. They tear into interviewees mercilessly and confront the person with hard evidence, facts and figures, while demanding straight answers - not obscure explanations, justifications and yes ... lame duck excuses.

Manmohan Singh got away a bit too lightly, a bit too easily, a bit too quickly. And at the end of this round, we, the voters, remain as clueless about his position and views on key national issues, as before.

You know what? The old maun vrat prime minister was a better bet. Now it's official - there is indeed a lame duck at the helm of affairs in India.

Quack! Quack!

## WHY KIRAN BEDI....?

*I*t happened to Barkha Dutt. Now it's Kiran Bedi's turn. At this point in time, 'Crane' Bedi, India's most high profile, female (ex) top cop, has talked herself into a corner, going by the widespread hostility she has generated on the internet during Anna Hazare's 13-day agitation. Since she was one of the key players of the Anna campaign and visible on TV screens 24x7 during the period, there was just no escaping the Bedi onslaught. Whether energetically dancing with the tricolour, giving regular updates on Anna's condition, mocking parliamentarians or just being officious, Bedi, clad in her trademark, macho salwar-suits with matching jackets was the tough talking spokesperson everybody loved to hate. Her 'Anna is India, India is Anna' declaration did not go down too well with critics, who kept urging the over eager former cop to calm down and take a break. Or, at least give poor viewers a break. That is Kiran's personality - you either love her or loathe her. Ignoring Kiran is not an option!

Well, now that the Ramlila show is over and everybody has gone home, it's time to deconstruct the event (for it was a carefully structured event, with highly capable event managers, make no mistake about that) and get a sense of the personalities behind Anna's rise to superstardom. Let's be honest, we live in intensely image-conscious times, driven more by perceptions than reality. Anna's fast turned out to be a made-for-television protest - whether it was planned

that way or not. People across the length and breadth of India, watched a 74-year-old man taking on the mightiest in the land, fasting for his one-point mission, which is to root out corruption through the Jan Lokpal Bill. A mission that found countless takers in a nation that had reached boiling point dealing with venality and graft on an every day basis and at every level. But for Anna's mission to succeed, he needed a crack team to push his agenda forward. His Gang of Four included top brains (Arvind Kejriwal, Shanti Bhushan, Santosh Hegde and Kiran Bedi). Kiran must have been allotted the ringmaster's portfolio, for that is how her role appeared, as she shepherded Bollywood celebs to the dais and kept up a non-stop entertainment show against the backdrop of India's two Gandhis - the original and the freshly-minted one - Anna Hazare. The visual alone was photogenic enough, but Kiran's full-blooded performance was electrifying!

Given that a victory (albeit, qualified) has been declared by the Anna Camp, why then does Kiran continue to attract so much flack? Perhaps it has something to do with her appearance and attitude. Compare the crowd's favourable response to Medha Patkar (brought in at the tail-end of the sensitive negotiations), who held the stage clad in crumpled home-spun sarees, ill-fitting blouses, her unkempt, undyed hair in a careless braid. Her speeches were strident and uncompromising, forceful and fierce. But she refrained from nautanki (reference: Kiran's infamous mimicry act) preferring to concentrate on getting valid points across as emphatically and swiftly as possible. She exploited TV time to her own advantage, without once inviting ridicule. That's smart. Medha is brilliant at what she does, but this was the first time that she was given such a gigantic platform to air her views on a subject that found universal appeal. Anna's protest against corruption had many more takers

than Medha's controversial Narmada dam campaign. If some viewers felt uncomfortable with Kiran Bedi's hectoring style, it was Medha who restored the balance and brought in the required gravitas. Even though both women were on the same side of the fence, their respective styles were entirely at a variance. Medha's was more cerebral as she attempted to educate the masses, Kiran's more playful as she took the showbiz route to entertain, rather than inform the restless crowd. The rather unfortunate message Kiran sent out was that of a publicity hound hogging all the limelight, hamming it up on camera, while colleagues did the real work outside the glare of the spotlight. Kiran's folly should act as a lesson to all those supporters of worthy causes. There is something known as overkill. And a little restraint hurts nobody. Manish Tewari will no doubt agree!

## MODI'S MASTER PLAN

*There's Something About Mary* – remember that delightful movie by the Farrelly brothers – Bobby and Peter in 1998?

Well, there's something about Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi, too. What that something actually is, nobody knows for sure. In Mary's case, it was obvious. Mary (played by the delicious Cameron Diaz) is seriously cute. Even Modi's most ardent admirers won't describe the man as 'cute'. No sir, Modi is a different kettle of machchi. Now that he has fasted for 'us' and more or less declared his intentions to go for the top job in 2014, perhaps it's time to take another look at the 'new', 'improved' Modi (like those detergent tablets in the eighties that always promised a whiter wash for dirty linen), and ask ourselves: Is he the person we want as our country's next prime minister? Really? Narendra Modi?

Okay, okay. Let's give the guy a fair chance to explain himself ... absolve himself (if that's possible). After all, allowing him to do that will also revalidate our claim to being a working democracy. There are enough open minded citizens willing to hear him out ... provided what he's saying is truthful, acceptable, incontrovertible. So far, we have seen 'Modi the Bragger' at his swaggering best. Nobody can deny he is a charismatic orator, who wears many hats (but no skull caps, thank you). Modi talks big. Modi acts big. But, guess what? With all our prejudices and pitfalls as a people,

we still possess a great deal of common sense. It is difficult to fool the Indian electorate, as poll results have shown in the past. Of course, the process is faulty as hell, and our elections are chaotic, even murderous. Of course, there is poll violence and what is quaintly described as ‘booth capturing’. Of course, we see criminals as candidates. Our parliament is filled with highly suspect, exceedingly dodgy, individuals. So what? They have been voted into power. And that’s where it ends.

Narendra Modi’s story is different. His baggage is unique. Not a single other politician in independent India has faced such serious accusations involving the death of over 2000 people. That’s a lot of blood to deal with for one individual. No matter how hard he tries to distance himself from Godhra, it’s going to be one hell of a challenge. Nobody is ready to forgive and forget one of the greatest tragedies in modern India. What the Modi campwallas are attempting to do is different and possibly, dangerous. The recasting of Modi as a national icon is based on just one aspect of his governance – economic prosperity in Gujarat. Moral issues obviously do not rate, nor do they come into the picture. The argument being, if Modi has delivered on the economic front and his state has beaten various financial records, we must overlook everything else. Including Godhra. People point out that it is the same Modi who has brought communal stability to Gujarat and successfully brokered peace between the Muslims and Hindus in the after math of the bloodbath in 2002.

Is that the factual picture? Or is the truth much, much more complex? Has Modi generated genuine good will, post-Godhra, or has he merely sent out an unambiguous message to the minority community that reads: behave ... or else? Worst of all, has Modi even once expressed remorse and assumed responsibility for the bloodiest riots post-

Independence India has witnessed? Even at this crucial juncture in his political trajectory, when he is constantly harping on the six-crore people of his state who he is concerned about, irrespective of religious affiliations, it's hard to take him at his word. Unfortunately for Modi, he is dealing with a gigantic credibility gap, which remains unbridged. Manipulating and altering public opinion is a monumental task. Modi will have to work much harder for his 'brothers and sisters'. A three-day upvas, and all that sadhbhavana mumbo jumbo, is simply not enough.

Despite these reservations, Modi's well orchestrated debut as a 'national' leader has sent a few shivers down the spines of his rivals and adversaries. There are far too many potential prime ministers in the BJP at this point. Their attempts to project a united front look, and sound, hollow. Unfortunately, this is leading to a total 'jhamela'. Whether L.K. Advani's rath yatra is successful politically and has given the party the results it was aiming at or Nitin Gadkari's new silhouette wins more supporters, voters are sitting on the fence and remain skeptical, even unimpressed. It would make things so much easier if our netas stopped playing coy. Why behave like virginal brides afraid of being deflowered, when they are in fact seasoned professionals ... veterans of political 'suhaag raats'?

Before we know it, 2014 will be upon us. Right now, all we have are assumptions. Is Rahul Baba going to be the official nominee of the Congress party? Will the BJP surprise us all with an alternative candidate and dump Modi? Is Sushma Swaraj the chosen one, after all? And does that mean Arun Jaitley will retire hurt and sulk in a corner? Aur phir, Nitish Kumar ka kya hoga?

In all these speculations, we are overlooking the one person who will eventually call the shots - the Indian voter. Going by history, this person is rarely swayed by theatrics.

This person is looking for what any sensible person desires in life - security, roti, kapda, makaan. Preferably, at a price that is realistic and affordable. This person instinctively knows such a wish list requires an environment that's politically, militarily, financially stable. Religion simply does not come into the picture. A party that steers clear of religious divisiveness and focuses on providing basics, will be the party that walks away with the votes.

And puh-leeze, can we forget fasts, rath yatras and other stunts for now?

## HERE GOES BIN LADEN!

'It's a go!' said Obama. And they went...!

How I love that line: 'It's a go!' said President Barack Obama. And they went! It is so quintessentially American. So cowboy!

On Friday, 29 April 2011, the mighty president of the United States of America ordered the historic raid that killed one of the most dreaded men who ever lived - Osama bin Laden. Strange, but not even a week later, all the drama witnessed by incredulous viewers across the world, is beginning to resemble a bang bang Western from the early eighties. 'Geronimo EKIA ...' was the terse confirmation from Leon Panetta, CIA chief, to his boss, after those mysterious SEALS descended on an ugly mansion in a peculiarly named town (Abbottabad) deep inside Pakistan. Nobody in India had really heard of this blessed place, nobody ... except our very own actor Manoj (Bharat) Kumar, who was born there.

Listening to President Obama's precisely delivered televised speech (strictly, no emotions), it was impossible not to rub one's eyes in sheer disbelief and ask, 'Is this really the whole story? Will the world ever know what really happened on that moonless night?' The answer is obvious: No, we won't. The sensible thing to do is to take Obama's word for it ... and move on. There will be versions galore in the years to come. Military analysts will deconstruct and point out the obvious holes in the official version. But for

most observers, it's enough that Obama took out the man responsible for the deaths of so many innocent people, not just in America, but across the world.

Why probe? Or go too deeply into how it was done ... why now ... or even that it came nearly a decade too late. Let's just say: 'Thank you, Barack,' and khisko to the nearest disco. The euphoria of this victory needs to be savoured just a bit longer, without nit-picking or bitching. Though, it's hard not to indulge in either activity, given some of the obvious absurdities and contradictions that are now emerging. Kyunki, think about it: is a dead Osama better than Osama alive? Does his death make the world a safer place? On the contrary, we are back to square one, looking over our shoulders at possible retaliatory action planned by members of the dreaded al-Qaida. Some say the backlash is inevitable.

Two nights after Obama's announcement, I was with a low key, self styled America expert. This is a very clued-in person who hangs out with sources most professional journos would give an arm and a leg to cultivate. I was pretty sure he'd be in the mood to brag a little ... or even, a lot! People like him make a pretty cushy living out of creating 'clout perceptions' that suggest their proximity to powerful insiders. I asked my acquaintance some basic questions about Operation Geronimo - questions that demanded commonsense not military intelligence. From where did those attack choppers take off? If they flew in from a distance, even a short one, how come they went undetected for close to an hour? What about the noise? Sure, it was a moonless night and black birds (even gigantic ones) in the sky are hard to spot. But we are not discussing visibility here. What about hearing? Those guys in the neighbourhood may have been asleep, but were they also deaf ... did nobody hear the roar of those killer machines hovering over their heads?

The expert leaned forward conspiratorially and said: ‘Why are you forgetting one thing? It is the Americans themselves who have given all the hardware to Pakistan, trained their men, set up the systems. How difficult is it for the very same Americans to use the systems, facilities, locations, codes and machines to conduct such a strike from within the country? Who would suspect or stop them? It is the Americans who have equipped the Pakistani military, armed them to the teeth, given billions of dollars to create sophisticated establishments all over. They merely used their own expertise and free access for this operation. Smart move. I’d call it a good return on their investment!’

I immediately bought the guy two more drinks. Whether or not this is an accurate assessment, it made sense. The Americans neatly turned the tables on their ‘students’ and pulled off one of the biggest coups before those sleepy chaps could blink.

The hard work begins now. According to Mr. Know it All, this has been one of Obama’s shrewdest moves, not just to assert himself and work on falling ratings (up, already), but also to show his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton her place. Apparently, Barack is a bit tired of Hill and Bill running the show in Washington. The Clintons were seen as an annoying, interfering duo, trying to dominate the White House with the full support of key aides loyal to both of them. It was time to show them who was boss. It was also time to tell the world he was indeed the Most Powerful Human Being Alive, and never mind detractors constantly reminding him of his failings ... his weaknesses.

The ‘Situation Room’ images had their own story to tell. Hillary looked worried as the team waited for more live feeds from SEALS in Abbottabad. Obama appeared the coolest customer in the group, casually attired in a white tee and bomber jacket. But it was the president’s calm and

strong address to his people and the rest of the world, a few hours later that was to become the definitive moment of his presidency, regardless of what followed. I have to confess, I have always been critical of his much acclaimed oratory. No doubt, he has a great speech writer and Obama delivers those evocative lines faultlessly. But a tele-prompted speech remains a mechanical performance and somehow doesn't touch hearts in quite the same way as an old fashioned, unrehearsed bhaashan. Clearly, I was in a minority on this one going by the spate of nasty comments posted on my blog after my spontaneous reaction to the address.

Acchha ... now to clear the debris left behind by those 79 SEALS in four choppers ... physical and psychological debris.

Khel Khatam? Hardly. Kahani abhi baaki hai. A new khel has just begun.

Kyon, Kayaniji?

## ONLY RAAVANS IN INDIA. WHERE'S RAM ....?

 Kay. A day after Dussehra and we are done with burning Raavan's effigies across India.

And at least a few people across the country are in a celebratory mood knowing they earn more than Rs.32 a day. And as we prepare for Diwali - the annual festival of lights (even a single, decorated diya costs more than those measly thirty-two bucks!) and discuss the victory of good over evil for the 900th time, we are fooling nobody. Least of all, ourselves. Let's face it, we are in a mess. A terrible mess. Chachu Chids\* and Bodo Da Pranab\*\* can hold hands in public, even kiss and pretend to make up. But sorry ... their overstated bonhomie has come through as a patently false and very unconvincing patch up. The kind one associates with high profile, warring Bollywood couples who appear together on reality shows to promote a new film, and dash back to their vanity vans the moment the shoot ends, to continue snapping and snarling in private.

This sort of a spat would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago. Politicos have always waged bitter battles against colleagues, but never in the public domain. Such incidents were shrewdly handled behind closed doors, much like joint family feuds. That two of the most astute and powerful men in the Cabinet decided to slug it out in such

\*P. Chidambaram    \*\*Pranab Mukherjee

a khullam khulla manner, suggests just one thing – there's nobody in charge at the top of the heap. Anarchy within families generally gets out of hand when the patriarch or the matriarch is too weak to arbitrate and restore order.

It looks like the present scenario in Delhi is similar. The patriarch (Manmohan Tauji) looked and sounded bewildered, even overwhelmed by the sudden outbreak of hostilities within the fold, while the matriarch (Sonia Madamji) was recuperating overseas, and not in a position to intervene when required. By the time madamji came back and took control, the damage was already done. That she asserted herself immediately on her return, says a lot about her complete and absolute control over the unwieldy party that has been bogged down by indiscipline and ego issues for quite a while. The two jhagda-jhagdi stalwarts eventually managed a small face (and party-saving photo-op), plus, issued loaded statements that required no decoding. By then, the chattering classes had drawn their own conclusions.

Dekho bhai. Life is ajeeb. And has a gajab kahani. But when those who run the show start behaving like errant schoolboys, squabbling in a football maidan, then even the most loyal supporters realize that the bimaari is far more widespread than it appears. Since the tough and enduring fabric of India has remained consistently intact because of the reverence we possess for the Great Indian Family system, it is but natural that we should suffer from a case of instant disorientation and experience a deep sense of disillusionment when the head of the parivar is seen as a kamzor individual – someone whose authority means not a thing. At such crisis points, our belief in the maa-baap system (that has kept us together for centuries) gets rudely shaken. Without a wise, mature, caring, strong pitaji and mataji, the family structure becomes scarily dheela.

Problems start. Tiffs happen. Family disintegrates!

Nobody wants that. Not even Manmohan Singh's detractors. He was India's nominated father figure. A benign head of the family, we believed in for the longest time. He just seemed better than the rest. Morally superior. Above and beyond corrupt practices, not even corrupt thoughts. A man India could trust. Rely on. Not terribly ambitious. But sober, soft spoken and non-threatening. Someone capable of handling the many personalities and thin skinned colleagues in the chaotic coalition that was clobbered together (and has miraculously survived so far). Let's hand it to him - Manmohan Singh 'managed', where several others might have failed. His job description was never as sexy as Chidambaram's or Pranabda's. And the poor man was willy-nilly reduced to playing the role of madam's chosen courtier. This couldn't have been much fun for the celebrated economist, frequently credited with having turned India's economy around. But such was the rather unenviable image and positioning he was stuck with. Despite that, he acquitted himself reasonably well. Till the recent debacle.

It's time for our favourite Tauji to go back to being the man India loves to trust. It's a pretty difficult expectation to live up to. But if anybody can pull it off, it's our blue turbaned friend. We like the familiar. Manmohan Singh is the familiar ... the familiar fall guy. We'd like him even more if he stopped playing the fall guy and started kicking butt.

## CASTING COUCH IN POLITICS

'OMG! Don't tell me! "Selfridges"? Those guys have attacked "Selfridges"? It's been totally destroyed? This is just too sad, man! What's going on? C-R-A-Z-Y!'

That was a typical Mumbai reaction to the unfolding horror story in London. No issues discussed beyond the possibility of not being able to shop at their 'favourite' store on the next trip to their 'favourite' city and second home - London.

Mumbai tabloids concentrated almost exclusively on which Bollywood stars were stuck in the inferno, and what sort of a loss their hapless producers would face on account of 'this thing' going on 'out there'. That's Mumbai. Shopping and Bollywood. Nothing else matters. Well, not half as much.

The best thing about meeting Delhi journos is the heavy duty swapping of masala news that takes place after a few drinks. It's a fair deal. Scribes from the capital are obsessively interested in Bollywood gossip. Who's doing whom? And Mumbaikars so want to know the asli, insider track on the bonking habits of netas ... which randy old goat has bought a Birkin for the latest mistress. There is enough dirt flying around to make media mughal Rupert Murdoch jealous! The disgraced and defunct 'News of the World' can happily relaunch in India and find countless takers!

The amusing thing about these hard core gossip sessions is that both sides pretend to know much more than they actually do. Both happily ‘bull@#\$\* away. And nobody gets fooled. But while the animated adda is on, it’s the most entertaining way of spending an otherwise dull monsoon evening. At one such recent gup shup, we Mumbaikars were agog listening to wild stories about the sexual antics of some high profile Dilli netas. For one, we were curious how these netas found the time to engage in such hectic boudoir activity. For another, given the security cover most of these people (men and women) enjoy, how did they manage their clandestine lafdas without getting caught?

To this query our worldly friend replied it is now an established part of Delhi culture. Since pretty much everybody’s at it, everybody’s lips are zipped ... it is so darn rampant. Frankly, I was mighty impressed. Wow! Compared to these shenanigans our Bollywood studs look like duds. Actors are forced to sneak around corners, hide inside vanity vans, hire decoys, leave for foreign shores, use subterfuge, create elaborate alibis and then lie outrageously when confronted.

No such problem for the love rats from Delhi. A few Cabinet ministers are so brazen, chortled the Dilliwalla, they’ve taken to hunting in packs. Not only is information generously shared, but so are partners! The well-connected source spilling the beans on these VIPs was on a roll ... and we couldn’t get enough of all the vivid descriptions spilling forth ... some involving the unlikeliest people indulging in the most bizarre activities at the weirdest of venues. This was deliciously wicked stuff, and compared to what was being revealed about the profligate side of Delhi politicos, Mumbai’s movie stars sounded like amateurish school kids on a picnic.

But, well beyond bazaar gossip involving top leaders, the interesting part that evening was the reference to the casting couch in politics. It is Delhi's worst kept secret. Our intrepid source reeled off several recent examples of bright, capable, attractive men and women on the fringes of power getting catapulted into prominent positions overnight. What all of them had in common was a godfather who has helped them get to where they are today. Some of the ladies are shaadi-shuda, and as our source mockingly pointed out: 'One of them looks like she's on a permanent karwa chauth.' And yet, it's no longer classified info in Delhi who her lovers are and how she has used each liaison to further her career goals. If she is lobbying for more and more clout within her own party, she is also ready to pay the price for it by bedding seniors. Some other ladies of a certain age who enjoy high visibility, are openly jealous of this woman, vividly described by an ex as 'a tigress in the bedroom.'

The problem starts when younger women, burning with ambition, decide to jump into the political arena. These females refuse to be thrown to the toothless lions who dominate politics. Sexual dissidents are 'advised' to change their attitude and play ball or else go back to where they'd come from. Our man from Delhi insisted some miffed women are thinking of filing sexual harassment cases against lecherous old fellows who constantly pester them to put out or stay out. Encouraged by what's going on in the rest of the world, the new breed is determined to fight the system and not oblige their political patrons. 'We don't want to end up becoming sex slaves of these horrible men. We are competent, capable and hard working. If we decide to sleep with anybody, it is on our terms... because we want to. Not because we have to.' Achcha? Badiya hai!

This was beginning to sound like the ghisa-pita movie script from the eighties - evil sarpanchs pouncing on buxom village belles with political aspirations. Paradoxically enough, gossip mills insist, the very same women who appear on various television channels defending victims of sexual crimes (generally underage girls from under privileged backgrounds), have been in similar situations themselves. Some remain trapped to this day, and are forced to show allegiance to the men who brought them into politics in the first place. The tougher ones have no problem dealing with the situation. They successfully manage their public image, get married, have children ... and continue the relationship with their patron. Ironically, a few of them are seen as activists for women's causes!

As a parting shot, our source mentioned how the roles are being reversed of late - women in power are demanding sexual favours from athletic toy boys in return for better positions within the political sphere ... cushier jobs...juicier contracts. Just as Bollywood gossip revolves around which young star's kismet changed overnight after sleeping with the producer-director, scandal sheets in Delhi are filled with salacious tales of sexual romps between desirable young MPs and decrepit party bosses.

The most amazing aspect of these revelations is that those old dogs can still do it!



*Seven*

GETTING THERE:  
THE TEEN YEARS

## Ms. TEEN MONSTERS

*Don't tell me I didn't warn you!*

Sooner rather than later, India will launch its own version of beauty pageants for kids. We are half-way there with those obnoxious reality shows that exploit underage children and expose the naked ambitions of their misguided parents. We have seen what happens to rejected contestants, but we are still at it - ruthless judges shredding the self-esteem of sensitive performers, illiterate parents egging them on to win - it is a ghastly and frankly obscene platform that has more to do with greed, money, fame than talent.

But when I read press reports of an 11-year-old British girl whose 31-year-old mother spent over Rs. 25,000 a month on 'beauty treatments' for the tot, I had had enough. Sasha Bennington, the little girl with gigantic ambitions, competed in fiercely fought beauty contests for pre-teens across the world. Anyone who has watched that jewel of a film directed by Jonathan Dayton called *Little Miss Sunshine*, will immediately recall the trauma and pathos of the plump girl who wants to win the crown in the face of cutting edge competition.

America seems to be entirely comfortable with these awful contests. But for Britain, it was a fairly new phenomenon, which is why Sasha hit the headlines. Her mother Jayne was anything but apologetic about her daughter's participation. Jayne told reporters that Sasha had her first set of false

nails glued on at the age of eight. Then, Sasha moved on to hair extensions, fake tans, facials and manicures. The precocious-looking beauty describes herself as 'blond, pretty and dumb'! How do you like that? Her mother insisted the girl made her career choice and as a parent, it was her duty to support her. Jayne added: 'I am just helping her do what she wants, like any good parent would. I hate it when people say I am a pushy mother. I'm not.' The scary thing was, Jayne may have been right.

I was at a shopping mall in Dubai recently and looking for a mint spray for my tired feet at a Boot's outlet. Most of the other avid shoppers present were adolescents closely examining the cosmetics' counters for the latest teen make up. These were school girls, still in their uniforms. I'd witnessed the same scenario in Hong Kong, where 12-14 year-olds were made up like professional models ... to attend school. I was told it wasn't uncommon for those girls to offer sexual favours to strangers in the loo of the mall, in exchange for the latest mobile phone! Walking through equally glitzy malls in Mumbai, one can also see similarly dressed and made up teenagers strolling aimlessly through the food court, often flirting with older men who follow them around hungrily. India is one of the world's largest destinations for child pornography. And yet, we are not sensitizing ourselves to this kind of blatant commodification of innocent kids.

The worst culprits are the organizers of aggressive reality shows that encourage painted up children dressed in cheap clothes to gyrate suggestively and mouth offensive lyrics of the latest Bollywood hits. Where are the watchdogs of public morals when we most need them? Is it poverty alone that pushes the parents of some of these contestants to exploit their own kids in this grotesque way? Poverty ... and ignorance, of course?

In America, the pre-teen beauty pageant business is huge and generates a lot of lolly. Since we have borrowed virtually every other concept on television from the West, one knew that it was only a matter of time before someone announced a kiddie contest that would see pre-pubescent, painted up, doll like creatures walking the ramp in revealing gowns and skimpy swimwear. I am all for encouraging self-expression in kids via dancing and singing competitions. But what we are witnessing certainly does not qualify as healthy entertainment. We are projecting children in a distorted and sexually charged light by dressing them up in adult gear and getting them to strut their bodies for gain.

God knows what sort of a woman Sasha will grow up into ... a gorgeous-looking angel or a hideous, angst-filled monster. What about her attitude to her body - the one she has been peddling since her tender girlhood? And the mind that has been programmed to accept physical assets as currency to be traded in the marketplace? Sickening? For sure. Suddenly, I could connect Raakhi Sawant with Sasha's story. But then again ... is it such a terrible life?

Must ask Raakhi (Sawant) ... or her mother, and all those who live off her.

## GUESS WHO'S PLAYING RUGBY ... AND WINNING?

I was back in Bhuvaneshwar for the second time in the last twelve months. Back, to visit an extraordinary school for 10,000 tribal kids representing 63 tribes from the region. This could possibly be the poorest and most deprived section of our society, where in this day and age, starvation deaths still take place.

It is a region so abysmally neglected, its disenfranchised people continue to live in the dark ages, literally and metaphorically. Under such primitive and distressing conditions, one man's vision has transformed the lives of tribal kids by creating the only such facility for tribals in Asia. It is called the Kalinga Institute of Social Studies (KISS, for short), and is located on a neat and scrupulously clean campus just a short distance from the airport. I felt privileged to be welcomed there by these remarkable kids who live in well maintained hostels and receive quality education - all for free!

The first time I'd visited them, they were enjoying a hearty, well balanced lunch and preparing for the second half of the day. They appeared confident, well integrated and happy. What a contrast to the lives of their forefathers who have lived pathetically marginalized lives for centuries, unaware of anything outside their forests. Even today, there are people amongst them who, believe it or not, have not heard of a word called 'India'. Women's Reservation Bill? Sonia Gandhi? You must be joking!

Neglected for generations, they lead an existence of total isolation in abject poverty, cut off from the rest of the world ... the rest of humanity. It is in the context of such a shameful sub-human existence, that when I was introduced to a teenager wearing a smart blazer and told she was the captain of the school's rugby team, I did a double take! Rugby? Being played here ... by tribal girls? Can it get more bizarre than that? I turned to Dr Achyuta Samanta, the founder of KISS, who is frequently referred to as the charismatic fakir by his countless international admirers, and asked for details, while my husband, an ardent former rugby player, engaged the young lady in an animated conversation about the game.

According to Dr Samanta, it all started when an English coach visited the school a few years ago and decided to train the kids to play this very boisterous, very Brit game. The kids succeeded big time, and soon were competent enough to get invited to compete internationally. Guess what? Compete, they did - and came back with the trophy for under-14s! That was just the beginning. Since that early victory, they have been playing the game all over the world and now have an American coach. The captain of the girls' team told me she was leaving for France soon where the girls will be playing against the top teams of the world. This is a phenomenal achievement by any standards. But I was curious to know how these kids (from the country's most backward and deprived region) managed themselves when they travelled abroad. Said Vikramaditya, a smart and motivated person who has worked extensively with tribal communities: 'It is amazing how quickly they learn. I travel with them sometimes, and watch as they rapidly teach themselves to swipe cards and effortlessly negotiate their way through hotels, airports and sportsfields. They are totally at ease, not at all intimidated by the unfamiliar and

most importantly, unafraid to ask questions when in doubt. They are incredibly swift learners.'

So they must be. Have to be. Given the brutal nature of the society they live in, it is nothing short of a miracle that their lives have been radically transformed thanks to one man's vision and faith.

I met another young lady who'd completed her law degree from a sister institute (Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, declared a Deemed University in 2004), who had just returned after a short course at the Harvard Law School, and had applied for a post-grad programme later that year. Her enthusiasm was palpable as she spoke about her dreams and aspirations. Just a few months earlier, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had inaugurated an impressive Convention Centre on the sprawling 500-acre campus. What had started as Dr Samanta's personal mission has since grown into a world class institution, attracting international scholars and other eminent personalities, who invariably leave the place carrying a sense of wonder with them.

But for me, it isn't just about those well designed buildings housing various faculties, or the ambitious expansion plans chalked out by Dr Samanta and his team. It is the light of hope in that young tribal girl's eyes, as she looks beyond the campus and at the future. In her transformation lies India's eventual redemption.

I am sure Sonia Gandhi would be pleased to meet her. And see her in Parliament one day.

## HELLO! IS ANYONE LISTENING ...?

*Dear World,*

Another year is about to end. And here I am ... an anonymous girl child, shivering in the cold, hungry ... exhausted ... wondering what the new year will bring. More hunger? More fatigue? More despair?

I can see my mother at the traffic light ... she is tapping on the window panes of those fancy cars, hoping to attract a few coins ... or if she annoys the owner enough, maybe a ten rupee note flung at her face to make her go away ... leave the occupant to continue chatting on that small cell phone. My younger sister and brother are fast asleep on the pavement, near the old laundry. Our pet dog Moti has cuddled up close to them to keep warm. All of them are huddled on the corrugated sheets of cardboard we managed to steal from the packaging company close by. We are okay!

We don't know who our father is - we've never seen him. Our mother says she is 25-years-old and once worked in a rich person's home as a housemaid. But from the time I was born, we have lived on this street and watched her beg. She has taught us to beg, too. When my brother was sick, I would tie him to my waist in a sling made out of rags, and carry him from car to car asking for alms. Some people took pity on us and gave me five hundred rupees. My mother felt really happy when she saw that note and told me to carry my brother around even after he became

well. Then my sister had an accident while running across the road after the lights turned green and the cars roared past us in a hurry. It wasn't the driver's fault - she was so tiny, nobody saw her in the dark. But, that accident gave us a lot of money - over two thousand rupees. My mother was most happy that day ... and even after my sister's fractured arm healed, my mother told her to keep the plaster on since people felt bad and kept giving more money.

These days my mother tells me to cover myself when I beg, since men stare at me and make dirty jokes. Ever since I started to bleed every month, my mother's attitude has changed. She tells me I must not talk to any man or I'll get into serious trouble. She also beats me a lot if she sees me chatting with customers who come to the laundry to pick up their clothes. It is dangerous, she says, and I don't understand. These men are friendly and make me laugh. Some of them give me chocolates and ask me to get into their cars. But I can't leave my brother and sister alone on the pavement, so I refuse. One day, when they are a little older and my mother isn't looking, I am going to run away and make my own life. One 'uncle' has promised me! He said not to worry about anything. He will give me clothes, food, money ... everything. He lives in a big house and he will keep me there ... but he doesn't want me to tell my mother anything. It is our secret, he keeps saying.

Maybe my life will change soon. I never cry and I haven't lost hope. All I know is that I don't want to spend my days begging on this road like my mother. She says her life is cursed because she was born female. She also says that had she gone to school she would not be on the streets today. I would like to go to school and become someone someday. That 'uncle' told me he would arrange that once I leave my family and run away with him in his big car. Last week he gave me a brand new dress saying it is for the New Year. I

have hidden it from my mother. He also gave me lipstick and powder saying I will look very pretty if I used both. I dare not try - my mother will kill me and ask too many questions.

Never mind, in a few days from now, it will be another year ... my mother has managed to get a few caps and whistles for me to sell at the next traffic junction where there are young people on motorcycles. She has taught me to clap, laugh and scream 'Happy New Year' each time a car stops. Let me practice now - 'Happy New Year.'

I am sure someone, somewhere will hear my prayers ... and wish me the same also.

God is great!

## BABIES AS FASHION ACCESSORIES

You know what they say to superstar actors? Never sign on a film that features either a baby or a puppy. Even the greatest thespians on earth have been reduced to the status of 'extras' or props when sharing screen time with those two scene stealers.

So, how is it that Hollywood/Bollywood hotties keep making the same mistake by adopting a cute bambino or an adorable pooch as the season's top fashion accessory? Apart from the unbeatable photo ops a cuddly little creature provides, I'm looking at this phenomenon from a completely different angle - exploitation of the ignorant.

A kid has no say in the matter. Does Tom Kat's little darling, Suri want to be the face of Gap Kids worldwide? She is just a toddler. Whatever happened to Tom Cruise-Katy Holmes' earlier squeamishness? Their stated need for absolute privacy? Or does big money change everything? Apparently so. Kids are the hottest sellers these days. If you can't have one ... heck, no problem ... go out and shop for one. Everyone's doing it. It's a trend, like skinny jeans, balloon skirts, tattoos. Blame it on Mia Farrow during the 1970s or more recently, Angelina Jolie. But acquiring a multi-coloured family has become de rigueur for people who position themselves as icons.

The idea is to project an open mindedness by 'embracing the world'. It's cool to adopt a Cambodian orphan. Play

mix-and-match. Get the skin tones to co-ordinate, so that the ‘exclusives’ offered to celeb glossies for a juicy fee, look like they are meant to – coffee table book-style family portraits without a single detail out-of-place. Air-brushed to perfection and impeccably colour co-ordinated.

Look at what happened in Mia Farrow’s case. One of her adopted teenagers from a South-East Asian country ran off and married Woody Allen, who was playing foster father to Mia’s brood! How mixed up is that!

Closer to home, Sushmita Sen, ever the avant garde trend setter, set the Bollywood ball rolling when she adopted little Renee and gave countless interviews on single parenting, while posing prettily with the tot. That tot is a little lady now, and bears a startling resemblance to Sushmita, who is not her biological mother. Then recently Sush added more. Taking a cue from Sush, several young desi starlets are talking about adopting babies, quite overlooking the enormous challenges such radical options present.

Unlike each season’s ‘It’ bag, which is nonchalantly discarded when a design house launches a new one, these kids can’t be put on the shelf once their novelty value fades. As style statements, they work for a couple of years. The media soon tires of featuring the mother and her little darling. What then? God knows raising ones own kids is a lifelong responsibility that requires high levels of commitment. Parents of adopted kids often display more than their share of sincere love and loyalty. The worry is when celebrities like Madonna get into the act and start shopping around for African orphans, almost like they are ‘collectibles’ on display, along with other pricey trophies (rare art works, heritage homes, polo ponies, jewels).

The arguments supporting such adoptions go that underprivileged kids from countries facing famine/disease, need angels like Madonna to ‘save’ them. But if millionaires

like Madonna (who already has two biological kids of her own), really feel for these deprived children, they could as easily sponsor them in their own environment, pay for their education, build hospitals. The possibilities are limitless. This would also take care of cultural traumas at a later age. But, what fun would that be for publicity-seekers in search of the next big thing that keeps them in the lime light?

Children have rights, but very little representation. Nobody bothers to ask them what they want. Most of these adopted kids are infants when they are inducted into a brand new family. I wonder what happens when say, the kid from Rwanda starts noticing that he/she is the odd one out in a sea of upper class, white faces in a play group? Creating a mini-United Nations within your own family sounds like an inspiring idea, especially when money is not an issue. Often, foster parents in this league are in search of something beyond material excitement. Adopting an African child seems to satisfy some strange need. Perhaps, it's a way of gaining entry into the international do-gooders club and showing the world how magnanimous you are.

But, my concern remains the long term interests of the hapless child, who has had no role to play in this game. Whether the parents are seeking emotional salvation or merely fulfilling a basic need, it is at the expense of an innocent life. Wealth and comfort are just two small aspects of a fulfilling existence.

It would be fascinating to know just how Jolie's, Madonna's or Sushmita's haute couture kids shape up and cope in the long run.

## LOLITA IS ALIVE AND WELL

*It* does seem terribly odd to read reports of eleven- and thirteen-year-old girls who are being used as models for decidedly grown up ads.

The peculiar part about this arrangement has to do with the fact that they are not endorsing teen products. These pre-pubescent girls are being passed off as young adults with a few clever flicks of the make-up brush, high heels, and entirely inappropriate clothes. When I read the report titled: 'Twelve going on twenty-two' in a newspaper recently I did a double take. These are not girls from underprivileged or uneducated background doing it to keep from starving. These girls are modelling for the dosh. And fame, of course.

Read what the mother of eleven-year-old Malvika Hoon has to say about her kid posing seductively for a photo shoot: 'Since she didn't have a real cleavage then, a tight top made sure she passed off as a 20-year-old.' Another mother (Dolly Chhikara) boasts about her teen daughter Aarti, who started modelling at the age of three: 'Her height is an advantage and we make sure she looks years older through make-up.' The 167-cms girl is seen in bridal shows and has done jewellery campaigns as well. A photographer named Rahul Dutta is quoted as saying: 'Skin care brands prefer young models as their skin is supple and flawless. There's a fresh appeal to their face.'

Child rights' activists may knock the trend, but the way it works is simple - the market gets what the market wants. And the market wants 'taaza maal'. Others in the glam business insist it's an acceptable trend given that it is popular in the West where agencies specifically ask for pre-teens and a model's career peaks before she hits 18! But then, are we in India also ready to accept transsexual models like Brazil's hottest cat walk queen Lea T, who is one, and proud of it?

Each time I catch a kid gyrating provocatively on television in those awful dance shows, I shudder to imagine what life beyond that garish set is like for these precocious children. When I spot the faces of their beaming parents cheering them on, I feel even more revolted. Do they not see how blatantly their kid's sexuality is being projected and exploited for the hungry eyes of countless voyeurs? Does it not scare the hell out of these idiotic, misguided people? Or is the lure of making a quick buck out of an innocent child powerful enough to blind those greedy mothers and fathers? Do they really want their nubile daughters to send out lurid signals to the audience? Or have they just not thought about possible repercussions down the line? Is it ignorance or avarice that drives such folks?

I recall talking to a shining example of parental exploitation - Raakhi Sawant - just before she arrived on the big ticket circuit. She wept big, fat tears recalling the days her mother would throw ghungroos at her and command her to dance for 'rich people'. Raakhi eventually struck gold (well, at least in material terms, forget emotional damage). Not every little girl shaking her booty for the cameras is as lucky. Given the times we live in, teen models being coerced into role playing by painting their faces and squeezing their budding breasts into tight tops, makes for a sickening story - no matter how lucrative the deals, or how prestigious the campaign. In fact, each time I spot pictures of Suri, the gorgeous daughter

of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, I cringe at the imagery. Here's a cute kid of high-profile parents being projected as a style icon, if you please! The kid's been wearing high heels and carrying designer bags virtually since she was a toddler! Now we are told she'll be launching her own fashion label since her fashion sense is so damn sharp that she provides valuable style checks for her parents!

A society that actively encourages and endorses this sort of sexual objectification of minors through mass circulated ads, reflects a scary, almost schizo attitude towards sexuality itself. When Vladimir Nobokov wrote *Lolita*, he was branded a dirty old man, and the book was banned in several countries for promoting child pornography. Today, as millions of women across the world take to the streets to protest against sexual violence, here we are foolishly promoting tween fixations through girls like Aarti and Malvika. Their mothers need heavy duty counselling. Were it not for these women pushing their bachchas into growing up in a mad hurry ... forcing them to slap on war paint and create fake cleavages ... in other words, persuading their kids to sell their garden fresh wares to a panting audience, those girls may have actually got a life.

A less twisted one!

*Eight*

BED N BEYOND

## THE 'D - GANG'

*D*ivorce is no longer a dirty word. Divorce happens. Life goes on. Big deal.

First, the French example whom we can trust to get the social barometer right. Recall how the Sarkozys in France sorted out their marital problems by getting quietly divorced, sans fuss and dramatic pronouncements. It was handled with admirable discretion and finesse by both, Nicolas and his photogenic second wife Cécilia, demonstrating once again that when it comes to matters of the heart, the French have no equals in terms of sophistication and subtlety.

That the president's marriage was headed for splitsville was no secret, given his ex-wife's aloofness throughout the run up to the win and at the swearing-in ceremony (she was photographed talking animatedly on her cell phone during the president's speech!). What followed made for an interesting comment on contemporary mores and manners. The feisty First Lady obviously decided she'd had enough of the hypocrisy ... without wasting further time, swiftly, sensibly, the two of them filed the required papers and called it a day.

That the stuffy, supercilious French press decided to let the world know just how coolly such developments are handled in their part of the world, was slightly annoying. But that's the Galles for you. As the French frequently point

out, a man of means without a mistress or two is like a stallion without a stud farm. In the Sarkozy case, though, it was the mare who wanted to bolt the stable. Quite a reversal of roles, given the colourful personal histories of former French presidents Francois Mitterrand and Jaques Chirac, whose long suffering wives endured decades of gossip, while the husbands strayed and raised parallel families.

The former Mrs Sarkozy showed far more spunk by turning her back on the many seductive perks that go with the president's grand office. As France's First Lady, she could have propelled herself most aggressively into the international arena, if she'd so wanted. Cécilia is intelligent, opinionated and attractive. She could have accompanied her husband to world events and become a power lady in her own right. Known for her outspokenness and unconventional views, Cécilia would so easily have become the darling of the international media, which was already obsessed with her.

Despite the low profile she'd opted for, she was on countless magazine covers being projected as a style icon, plus, the 21st century equivalent of Jacqueline Kennedy. It was hoped she'd bring some much-needed glamour and sex appeal into the Elysee, and dazzle the world with her bearing and class. Alas, that dream had to be aborted rather hastily!

At that time I had thought that if Nicolas Sarkozy wants to keep the paparazzi happy, he'll have to look around for a fresh companion. The alternative for the fitness freak is to roller blade solo through the vast spaces of his palace-residence. Like everybody else, the French also love a good 'scandale' even as they turn up their noses and sniff that it's the celebrity-crazy Americans who lap up political gossip while they themselves believe in giving personal space to their leaders. Like hell!

Perhaps without realizing it, Cécilia had, in fact, sent out a powerful signal to women the world over. Especially, wives who feel obliged to remain in loveless marriages ‘for the sake of society’. She took a highly modern and courageous decision when she turned her back on something that was over, instead of hanging on to the status quo. I’m sure it was not easy for her to say ‘adieu’ to a life of enormous privilege as a First Lady. But, she had the guts to walk away rather than compromise and live a daily lie. The reaction to the Sarkozy divorce also showed what a tremendous shift there had been in society at large. Nobody sat in judgement over their lives, by damning either partner or playing the blame game.

Imagine such a scenario in India. We all know what our politicians are up to, especially some of the suave, young MP’s who use Delhi as a convenient stomping ground. Desi media dare not expose any of them, but happily goes to town when Bollywood stars Saif and Kareena put in a joint appearance at a fashion event. Whether it was Atal Bihari’s dodgy ‘bachelor’ status or President Kalam’s devoted companions at Rashtrapati Bhavan, everyone’s lips were obediently sealed. Imagine then, if a Sarkozy were to happen in India. I can assure you, Cécilia’s counterpart would not be spared. Regardless of the issues involved, she would be tarred and hauled over the coals for being the vamp of the piece.

‘Cherchez la femme’ for once, lost its relevance in France.

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In India too the revolution has taken place in under a decade.

Remember how a few years back Mumbai high society was carved up in camps over two couples engaged in the painful process of sorting out separation papers? Though there were clumsy attempts by the media to dig up dirt, play the blame game and sensationalize the impending divorces,

there weren't too many takers for the story. Readers shrugged indifferently saying: 'Who cares? It's their life ... their issues ... forget it.'

Even Bollywood divorces no longer raise eyebrows as they once would have. Twenty years ago, the 'D-word' was not to be uttered in showbiz. It was okay to have affairs galore and live unhappily ever after. But no movie star wanted a 'tainted' tag. Warring couples led independent lives, often in different homes. But for the records, they stayed 'respectably' married. Then came the meaningless and hypocritical 'second marriages' with convenient conversions to Islam, which were dealt a swift blow when the law makers came down heavily on such liaisons. Those who scraped past that hurdle (Mahesh Bhatt), were untouched by the repercussions.

Fortunately, much water has flown under the Worli-Bandra sea link, and fans have become entirely blasé about such matters. When Aamir Khan divorced Reena and remarried Kiran, the sky didn't fall. Similarly, Saif Ali Khan's divorce generated zero value judgements. Ditto for cricketer Azharuddin, who upped and wed Sangeeta Bijlani after divorcing his first wife. Sanjay Dutt's multiple marriages cause no ripples.

Our television stars marry, divorce and remarry with the same level of apparent casualness as the characters they portray in popular soaps. Nobody blinks. Models and designers, who occupy a different space, are again spared the annoyance of having to 'explain' their liaisons. Sheetal Malhar being a good example of the bounce back. Business people are still fairly conservative when it comes to splitsville. But that didn't stop Atulya Mafatlal from arranging a pricey divorce before marrying Sheetal. Same story with the king of good times Vijay Mallya. Such examples galore.

For those who mistakenly believe such chopping and changing is easy for celebs who live by a different set of rules, the new realities tell a different story. Divorce has invaded/pervaded the middle class, as even casual statistics will establish. Put it down to stress levels generated by the pressures of urban living. Better still, attribute the change to the fact that women are in a position to walk out of bad marriages for the first time in India's history. But divorce is on the up and up. And the neighbours aren't in shock!

I was rather amused when I ran into one of mine in the car park and she cheerfully announced that her 30-year-old son had found a 'good wife' after divorcing his first (bad?) one. All in the space of four years. Similarly, the fancy maids who work in south Mumbai homes at impressive salaries, are rushing to file for divorce, the minute they feel their marriage sucks. 'We don't need to put up with drunk husbands who beat us and take all our money,' they state, even as their old parents in the village offer full support. A lady who worked in our home for several years and left recently to get married, has just called it off after barely two months of wedded bliss! I wondered if she was taking her cues from television serials which she was addicted to. Not at all, she assured me, adding: 'I discovered I had made a huge mistake by marrying the wrong man. Instead of wasting some more years with him, I thought it best to get out of it as soon as possible.' There are thousands like her in our cities. Women who work hard, pay their own bills and lead their lives on their own terms. The once judgemental desi society has stopped pointing fingers at those who dare ... who defy convention and call it quits once they realize the marriage is going nowhere.

A sign of our times. Good or bad, is a matter of opinion.

## LOOKING FOR A GOOD ‘FUTURE WIFE’...

*T*It's a bit late in the day for my husband to start questioning my wifely credentials. But I have to ask him this burning question: Did I qualify as a good ‘future wife’ when he met me three decades ago? If he answers honestly and with his hand on his heart, the answer will be a big, fat ‘No’!

But here we are, still struggling to make sense of a crazy institution called marriage. My worry is different. I am looking for ‘future wives’ for two sons at present. And asking myself to be careful. Very, very careful. I am going to brief the boys personally as well. Ever since Sid Mallya used this memorable description (‘future wife’) in the context of Zohail (the bottle blond from America) and the infamous Luke Perm IPL incident, there have been debates galore about the existence of this mythical creature henceforth referred to as the ‘future wife’. If we want to get grammatical and technical, then we must not attempt to deconstruct the term, or else we’ll get ourselves into a bloody tangle.

Let’s piece together the best we can what it means to be a past wife, present wife and future wife. For most guys, just that word ‘wife’ is enough to scare them. Now that young Sid has defined it better, several confused fellows are looking at their girlfriends a little strangely and asking themselves: ‘Does this chick really qualify as a future wife?’

Ladies with engagement bands on their left hand ring fingers are hitting panic buttons as well. What if they

suddenly don't make the cut and the fiancé calls off the wedding? What if they are at an IPL party and they run into Sid? Clearly, he has a wife metre, and that metre is rather exacting. According to this metre a future wife does not talk to strange men at a friendly bar, and definitely does not ask these men for their bbm (Blackberry) pins. Worst of all, she does not physically touch men, even less get to the dangerous stage where they feel she is all over them. Conduct of this kind disqualifies her as a future wife. And chances of her bagging a husband become remote if not impossible.

Ladies, you are warned!

Ironically enough, quite a few young men I spoke to (married and single) agree with Sid and are clear about one thing: If their fiancée were to flirt with someone, and if that someone happened to be a rakishly handsome Aussie cricketer, the fiancée would be ticked off and reminded of her status ('taken').

Their parents would also feel the same way about their future daughter-in-law's objectionable behaviour. So there! Sid has several supporters who are pretty relieved at least one guy has had the guts to say it like it is about ladies in committed relationships - behave or else.

The code of conduct for men who are booked but whose goose has yet to be cooked, is of course, different. What men do after a couple of beers is what men do, even if they are future husbands. They may exchange bbm pins with alluring female strangers (particularly those who are all over them), and invite them for drinks to a swanky hotel suite, and generally get into the spirit of the night. It's all in the name of good, clean, harmless fun. Future husbands remain carefree bachelors till they actually tie the knot, and their understanding fiancées need to accept that. Future

husbands need not adhere to a code of conduct - yup, the same one they subject future wives to.

None of these arguments comfort a mother of two yet-to-be-married daughters. Should I be sitting them down and making them memorise the Sid Mallya handbook for future wives? Not a bad idea, actually. They may think me mad if I suggest they transform themselves into demure, docile women who fix their men with the famous Nancy Reagan 'gaze'. But if the Prince of Good Times is recommending a certain set of rules, and he is one of India's twitter heart throbs, the girls should pay better attention. In fact, someone smart should start a Future Wives Club, a sort of finishing school for fiancées. There will be countless takers going by the hysterical response to Sid's tweets.

As for me, I'm in a bit of a quandary. As a past and present wife, do I have a future or not? I daren't ask my husband. He may turn around and want to know if I have shared a bbm pin with some tall, dark and handsome stranger at a party. Future wives are not supposed to fib. Right, Sid?

## SHUBHA MANGALAM AT 60 ...!

I was delighted when I read about screen ‘daadi’ 60-year-old Suhasini Mulay’s recent marriage (first one!) to a 65-year-old particle physicist, Atul Gurtu. My spontaneous response was to congratulate the happy couple and wish them every happiness on Twitter.

Avid film goers will know the lovely Suhasini from her many movies (she won the national award for *Hu Tu Tu*), and I am sure her fans have responded positively to the good news as well. Interviewed by a Mumbai tabloid on the subject, Suhasini was candid and upfront when she admitted she’d met the widower over Facebook: ‘Initially, I didn’t want to go beyond the www world,’ she stated. But clearly, their regular chats must have been substantial enough for both to agree on meeting and taking their virtual relationship forward.

According to Suhasini, she was greatly impressed and touched by Atul’s devotion to his late wife (they’d been married for 36 long years, and she died of cancer). After the diagnosis, Atul had pledged to make her as happy as he could by doing everything they’d ever wanted to do. While it must have been a pretty tough decision for the grieving widower to give marriage a fresh shot, for Suhasini, who had always imagined she’d be alone in life, her change of heart surprised not just her, but her family, too. Apparently, her sister asked: ‘Are you drunk?’ after she phoned her to

announce the good news. Once she had digested it, the sister said: 'Hang on, now I need a drink!' An aunt thought Suhasini was talking about a television marriage (since she acts in serials), while another sister treated it as a joke! As for strangers present at the Bandra court where they got married last year, 'their jaws dropped', shrugged an amused Suhasini.

It is certainly a story worth converting into a television soap opera. It has all the elements required - including a happy ending.

As an actor who plays a 'daadi' on the small and big screen, Suhasini's professional life has always been hectic with non-stop work schedules that take her all over India. While her brand new husband (after retiring as senior professor from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research a few months ago), was ready to switch gears and take it easy, Suhasini had to rejig her personal priorities. A long term, live-in relationship had ended in 1990 for Suhasini, and she was perfectly reconciled to the idea of a solo lifestyle, till she met and fell in love online! After an Arya Samaj wedding, the happy couple went off to Delhi to meet Atul's folks.

From the looks of her wedding picture, in which she is dressed like a simple, traditional Maharashtrian bride, Suhasini is exactly where she wants to be at this stage in her life - with a partner she loves and respects. Anybody would agree this is a heart warming, mature romance that has brought two accomplished people together. It may sound unconventional to some ultra conservatives, but our society is changing - and changing very rapidly, at that. There are going to be several similar autumn romances across the country, since there are countless lonely senior citizens in search of stability, security, companionship and happiness. Forget about what their friends may think about these choices, chances are their children (if any) are likely to

approve and encourage the couple to go ahead -and just do it! That old bogey ('samaj kya kahega?'— what will society say?) no longer has the power it once had.

Our lives are getting more and more insulated ... even isolated. Older folks are increasingly being left to fend for themselves the best they can. Society no longer provides the old buffers, and familiar safety nets (extended family) have long been removed. In such a grim scenario, they have nobody to turn to but others like themselves, who are also stuck in the same boat. If you are fortunate enough to find a genuine soul mate like Suhasini obviously has, then count yourself lucky. You are in the exclusive club of being amongst God's chosen few. It is good that our hypocritical society is allowing seniors to have more control over their emotional lives. Suhasini has always been the frontrunner for change (as her award winning documentaries clearly establish). This is her precious time to fulfill her own personal dreams. Atul Gurtu is indeed a blessed man ... but wait a minute ... so is she!

Here's wishing the two of them many years of friendship and trust, above all else.

The rest will follow.

## PATI, PATNI AUR WOH

*(P)*remember Eliot Spitzer?? What an ass.

The world laughed at the man who threw it all away, for a piece of ... you've guessed it - ass! But when that belongs to a seriously hot looker-hooker, one has to exclaim yet again - what an ass! A smart ass, at that.

Strange how the moral barometer of the world swings - the gorgeous 22-year-old prostitute, known simply as 'Kristen' in her line of work (pricey escort agency girl), came out of the mess smelling of roses. While the ex-mayor of New York (Spitzer), who hired Kristen's services in Washington D.C. not only lost his job, but was sued for past misdemeanours by enemies who were praying for just such a chance!

The most pathetic player in this sexual scandal was Mrs Silda Spitzer, the sad-eyed spouse of the rake-on-the-make. Interestingly enough, the American press focused more on the discarded wife's choice of colours during her 'I stand by my man' public appearances than her sorry position. Trust the presswallahs to analyze the fashion statement the poor woman was supposed to be making, over the other more emotional statement about the tattered marriage that had already been made by her straying husband.

Style-watchers applauded Silda's choice of a quiet blue jacket teamed with pearls for the first appearance, and commented on her more assertive black blazer worn with a bold scarf, on a subsequent sighting. Was this a silly,

shallow media game or did we miss something? Do women in a similar position (pathetic), consult experts who colour co-ordinate grief? Had the stricken wife chosen to wear a defiant red suit instead of the drab blue, would viewers have been less sympathetic towards her? Apparently so.

Trade gurus complimented Silda, and stated she had got her 'look' just right. The pearls added a 'royal' touch, according to them, and worked better than flashy diamonds! It made me wonder if such a scenario were to repeat itself in India would the wronged woman consult a specialist for wardrobe guidelines? And would the specialist advise her to skip jeans/salwar-kameez in favour of a blue saree? Would that work with the public? Is blue the official colour of loyalty and sacrifice?

While Silda dealt with her colour palette, and agonized over the pearls *vs.* diamonds debate, Kristen managed a coup of sorts. She was offered mega bucks by leading men's magazines to strip for the centrespread. The editors had been crass enough to argue she stands to make much more moolah baring all for the one time shoot, than she would pandering to a succession of men like Spitzer. Money-wise, they were right. Kristen was in the higher bracket of escorts, charging between \$2,500 to \$4,000 per hour. But what's that compared to the million bucks she was offered by *Hustler*? All in a day's work.

Kristen was said to be really smart and great company to boot. Folks from her town were thrilled that she had attracted world attention and even her own mother seemed alarmingly blasé about her young daughter's line of work. She defended Kirsten, saying the critics should remember the kid is just 22, not 32 or 42! Kirsten herself did what any smart chick in her place would - hired a sharp lawyer. Undoubtedly, she was offered juicy book/movie deals while the story was still 'hot'.

Aware of her marketability, Kristen played her cards right. The only big time loser in the scandal was Eliot Spitzer, who was foolish enough to pay for sex with plastic! Which idiot does that? Imagine using credit cards for the transactions and believing nobody would find out! Here's a man who had made a career out of his own upright reputation, when he strenuously went after corrupt officials and managed to jail the high and mighty. Then, in a dramatic reversal of roles, those very people were out to get him. Which is fine. But Spitzer was clearly not man enough (must ask Kirsten) if he needed to drag his poor wife into cruel public glare while facing the music. Silda should have refused to accompany the coward ... and if she did, she should have stuck to fiery red.

It does represent 'danger', right?



*Nine*

OF THIS, THAT, AND  
THE OTHER

## INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

*(I* was in my mother's womb when India became a free nation.

I'm sure, from that secure and warm environment, I could clearly hear the jubilant sounds of celebrations breaking out spontaneously in Satara (Maharashtra) where my father was posted as a district judge at the time. Drums, firecrackers and lusty shouts of 'Vande Mataram' rent the air as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's stirring radio address ended and the Union Jack came down forever in the compound of the court house, making place for our glorious tricolour.

Several decades later, I still got goose bumps each time my parents recounted that emotionally charged moment when the low hills around Satara came alive with burning mashaals of patriots who had waited patiently for this triumphant milestone in history - the birth of a brand new nation and its recognition by the watching world. We were finally a free people. Even to this day, despite my cynicism and occasional anger at the state of the nation, my eyes continue to get teary each time I hear the national anthem and I always but always, sing along, urging fellow Indians to follow. Often, I find myself the only person in a cinema hall willing to mouth the words 'Jana Gana Mana...' Frequently, I receive strange stares, even stray comments from others in the multiplex. I can almost hear them say: 'Has this woman lost it?'

Yes. It is that bad. Students today may or may not know the deeply moving words of the national anthem. Neither do they consider it important. Perhaps it's not a cool thing to be aware of its significance or meaning. Ask around. You'll be shocked at the levels of indifference, even ignorance. In a way, it is a positive signal. It means just one thing: today's young Indian takes freedom for granted. There is an inbuilt sense of security in such an attitude. Considering the fact over 70 per cent of India consists of under-30 individuals, it's the majority with no direct experience of the Independence struggle - that era belongs to their grand parents. It is far too remote for them to connect to. Therefore, I'd say, the biggest challenge today is to reconnect this dreamy, whimsical, chilled-out generation to the legacy that allows them to be who they are - free citizens in the world's most vibrant democracy. Not because they need to go on a guilt trip, but because they need to better appreciate and value the privileges they take so much for granted.

Travel remains the best eye-opener of all. Distance makes one exult in what we possess and so many people across the world are deprived of - freedom in all its complexity. Freedom that allows us to be who we are. I wonder how many of us recognize the immeasurable price tag attached to this gift? Free speech, that is such a vital component of this freedom, is denied to countless others. I found myself reacting with genuine surprise in Mexico City last year, when our hosts asked: 'Aren't you afraid of speaking your mind? It is not something we are used to in this part of the world.' Those chilling words stopped me in my tracks. Made me think yet again about our good fortune that allows each one of us to live, breathe, articulate, demonstrate whatever it is we feel strongly about. True independence is about fearlessness. The same fearlessness our forefathers displayed

when they took on the might of the British empire - and won.

As a fiercely proud Indian, I take pride in linking my own personal independence to that of our country's. If one goes, so will the other. It is worth remembering that precious fact as we proudly enter each year of celebrating India's freedom.

Jai Hind!

## BATTLE HYMN OF THE PUSSYCAT MOTHER

I am convinced Amy Chua, the Chinese-American author of the bestseller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, wrote the book to make other moms insecure and jealous. Well, she certainly made me wonder where I'd gone wrong raising my six children.

Amy, a Yale professor, married to an American-Jewish husband who is a novelist, has come up with a theory about parenting that is not just daunting but positively terrifying! She has a one point mission: to make her two daughters into super achievers, no matter what it takes. Amy was raised by exceedingly frugal Chinese parents who stressed on the virtues of hard work - well, the results are there for all to see.

The reason why her book has generated so much heat is because of her contention that American parents are a bit too laid back and liberal with their own kids. The typical American style of parenting, she argues, leads to the kind of self-indulgent children who take life for granted and willingly settle for second best. Her own daughters were raised in the 'traditional Chinese' style, which involved a punishing regimen bordering on the cruel. She did not allow them to watch television, access computers, go on dates or participate in plays or sports at school. Instead, they were forced to practice music and slog over their text books, with Amy unwilling to settle for anything less than A+ grades.

Amy criticizes the ‘Western’ style of parenting, which only fosters mediocre thinking that leads to self-esteem issues in later life.

Since the publication of the book, mothers the world over are asking themselves where they have failed and which category they belong to. After digesting the contents of Amy’s memoir, I dealt with my own self esteem issues. I figured I fell into the pussycat category of mothering. Or worse, the benign cow. My own mother would have been a meek lamb. Both of us were naïve enough to believe all that a child ever needed was an abundance of love and understanding - that’s it!

Advocating achievements came really low down on the parenting scale. If the children did well at school and college (surprise, surprise – they did!), then that was a huge bonus. But we weren’t there to either push or judge them. I remember attending all those dreary Open Days at school and meeting parents who knew every half-mark lost by their genius child. They’d aggressively demand an explanation from the teacher as to why that measly half-mark was cut. I’d be the one who’d spend no more than five minutes per teacher and ask breezily: ‘Any serious complaints? No? Oh good! Have a great day.’ If the kids wanted to spend hours and hours learning something thoroughly ‘useless’ (according to other parents), I’d encourage them to pursue that passion till they tired of it and discovered another.

Exams? Well ... so long as they got through and enjoyed their studies, I left them alone. Their adventures on the sports field interested me much more, and I liked their flirtations with music, movies, singing, art. Amy would have thoroughly disapproved of my casual behaviour and accused me of being ‘brainwashed’ by the Western pattern of parenting. Her own rather extreme responses to her children’s lapses (she threatened to burn all their soft toys

for a minor lapse) are honestly documented, which is what makes it such a compelling book. She is honest enough to admit one of the girls rebelled openly and got into tennis. Her husband's reservations clearly didn't count since Amy was so certain about and hell bent on her mommy objectives. She may be bang on, given the stupendous track record of Chinese-American kids in the U.S.

Another book that is also creating waves by taking an entirely different route to parenting is *Love in Two Languages: Lessons on Mothering in a Culture of Individuality* by Bonnie Ohye. Now this one seems more in tune with sensible parenting as opposed to tyrannical. Ohye talks about non-verbal communication, which according to her (and I entirely agree), is far more significant to understanding children than anything they say. Ohye's Japanese upbringing focuses more on a child's psychological needs, which are subtle, fragile and delicate. She talks about the power of a glance, a touch, gazes and gestures that often convey much more than the Western habit of mechanically repeating: 'I love you.' The language of silence can be potent and comforting at the same time, for through silence one appreciates serenity and grace. Ohye writes persuasively and convincingly. I recommend both books ... brute force wins wars but loses battles. Peace and love foster trust over a lifetime.

Sigh! I confess I've failed the Tiger Mum test. But there's hope for me as a pussycat whose kittens aren't faring too badly in the big, bad world out there.

Meoow!

## PAANI PURI POLITICS ...!

*©* *They* Bhagwan! Now street snacks are being targeted in Mumbai.

Suddenly paani puri (gol guppas to you), one of Mumbai's all time favourite munchies has been declared a health hazard, and paani puri vendors are being chased out by the newly-minted, over zealous health police of this totally unhealthy metropolis. Mumbai is a city so embarrassingly filthy, even self-respecting rats have moved out of the garbage heaps. Mumbai stinks! To high heaven. Especially April onwards, when mercury levels soar and humidity goes up. Mumbaikars have lived with the stench for years.

The first thing that hits the unwary visitor to the city at the airport itself is the peculiar stench that says perversely: 'Welcome to Mumbai!' It is all pervasive, lousy, fetid ... a combination of rotting fish, uncleared garbage, clogged drains, and piles of human excreta that lines railway tracks, streets, pretty much any available free space. Come April and Mumbaikars start battling pre-monsoon malaria. The bugs in Mumbai have developed their own mutant strains - nothing can eliminate them. Our cockroaches are a breed apart - literally! They are the size of the endangered sparrows, and can fly faster than any of them! Once the rains arrive, the garbage heaps grow into mini-mountains and block pedestrians from using those absurdly narrow foot paths. In any case, footpaths are used as open air lavatories by the

slum kids and are impossible to walk on without stepping into some bachcha's poo.

Given these overall conditions, what's all this rubbish about paani puri being a serious health hazard? Since when? Of course, paani puri is dirty. But, boss, our stomachs are zinc-lined. Of course, the paani used by vendors isn't mineral water. More likely, it is gutter water - contaminated and gross - but no worse than the brown water that runs through our taps. Paani puri enthusiasts know that ... but they still want their regular fix of this foul indulgence. Let them have it! As they say in colloquial terms: 'What goes of anybody's father?'

Why pick on poor paani puri alone? What about those luridly coloured ice golas that are peddled on carts during the long hot summer? Typhoid is just a gulp away when you suck on those disgusting concoctions made out of synthetic syrups, crushed ice and enough artificial colour to paint a bill board. What about the improvised juice stalls selling 'maara maari' (I am not making the name up. This is what an orange and mosambi juice combo is called in Mumbai). What about bhel puri - that is symbolic of Mumbai, not just in the culinary sense, but on many other levels? What an incredibly satisfying snack it is. I can do bhel puri any time, any day. And I do know it is a potential killer. That's the attraction ... and thrill.

Standing at a crazily busy traffic intersection, with underage millionaire brats driving pappaji's Porsche just beyond ones toes, and instructing the Bhaiyaji to hold the imli, but pump up the kothmir, is an experience that is quintessentially Mumbai. I wouldn't want to give it up for anything in the world - not even at the risk of missing a couple of toes as a consequence.

I can't profess the same level of commitment to the other Mumbai favourite - vada pav. I know it is cheap, filling and

wonderful. It is our answer to the Big Mac and so on. But frankly, it is a calorie bomb that I prefer to avoid. I like to pick my calorie treats and OD with care. If I am going to pig out, I'd rather do it on bhel puri (not that bhel puri is diet food, but come on ... compare puffed rice to vada which is a deep fried patty of potatoes). To make it worse, the lethal potato patty is squeezed into plump squares of bread with a layer of bright red garlic chutney? No chance!

Ditto for that other killer pav-bhaji - which, in addition to the potatoes - squashed and mushy - has half a packet of butter going into it. How else can one get that irresistibly gooey texture? But these far-from-healthy concoctions are spared the wrath of local political parties. Why? Because they are seen as being 'Maharashtrian' snacks. Made by Maharashtrians for other Maharashtrians. Which is hog wash. The only authentic, freshly cooked Maharashtrian snack is kanda poha - and it doesn't have too many takers. All other food in Mumbai's countless informal eateries has been introduced by 'outsiders'. From Udupi restaurateurs serving idli dosa, uttapam and upma, to the ubiquitous 'Punjabi-Chinese' and Jain Pizza joints catering to their loyal clientele. Nearly all these dodgy joints are dirty and do not deserve a license or health certificate. So?

We desis take our khaana-peena very seriously. Whether we gulp down gallons of ganney ka juice (100 per cent impure!), or choose to eat roadside fruit chaat with dozens of flies sitting on the sliced papaya - it's our call, our stomach, our health. If authorities are serious about protecting citizens from various health hazards, why not start by cleaning up the roads? Making sure public hospitals maintain some level of sanitization? Providing public loos? Why go after those paani puriwallas who have been such an intrinsic part of Mumbai's vibrant street food culture for decades? Take your battle somewhere else, you guys. Leave us to slurp, gag and

choke while gulping that perfectly crisp puri filled to the brim with sweet and sour, over spiced water that travels like liquid fire down the gullet, bringing instant tears to the eyes ... and a gigantic smile to the face as soon as the tin plate containing those six, paper thin puris has been licked clean.

And oh ... how could I forget the post-paani puri burp? Aaaah - paani puri! Stay where you are. Stay the way you are. We'll love you regardless.

Thinggu to you, politicos!

## RAJIV GANDHI - STYLE BHAI!

*I*t helps to be handsome. Seriously handsome.

Rajiv Gandhi was seriously handsome. An absolute, drool-worthy hottie. With good looks on that scale, anything he chose to wear would have become a style statement - even a sack cloth. Since there are two Rajiv Gandhis to deal with (before and after becoming a neta), let's start with the former and that yummy picture of Rajiv and Sonia gazing lovingly at each other, soon after their simple and stylish wedding.

Sonia looks glorious with a curtain of heavy chestnut-coloured hair falling over her slim shoulders. But it is Rajiv who resembles a romantic movie star. Or a dishy Prince. This was at a time when Rajiv was very much a 'bomber jacket and jeans' sort of guy - laid back, international and effortlessly trendy. He wore leather and denim like his global contemporaries, his feet fashionably shod in the latest Gucci loafers. Critics never failed to take pot shots at his penchant for all things Italian - loafers included. In fact, he and his cronies were witheringly called the Gucci Gang or the Polo Babalog by detractors, who also pointed out Rajiv's fondness for pricey, limited edition pens, fancy shades (aviators, but of course, given his professional training as a pilot), and a watch collection that was the envy of connoisseurs.

Yet, there was a charming, throwaway nonchalance to all this. An effortlessness about his appearance that added to the

casual appeal. He left the flashbulbs to his younger brother Sanjay, who had rapidly switched gears to the politically correct, Congress-approved uniform of white kurta-pajamas by then. Since Rajiv Gandhi shunned the spotlight in those early years, his personal sartorial style made zero impact, which must have suited him just fine. He was being himself - reticent and mild-mannered. Happy to be enjoying life as a young dad of two gorgeous kids and husband to a beautiful woman.

Overnight, Sanjay's premature death caused Rajiv's world to come crashing down and nothing remained the same after that - not even his wardrobe. He insisted he 'Did it for Mummy', (joined politics) and it's fair to conclude he was being honest. But once that crucial decision to jump into the fray was taken, Rajiv Gandhi was a totally transformed man. For starters, he lost the hair on his head in the first year itself. He also lost a great deal of weight. Political life extracted a huge price from this man - emotionally and physically. From this point on, his public appearances became standardized - impeccably tailored white khadi kurta-pajamas replaced those macho bomber jackets and jeans of old. The makeover was dramatic, sudden and complete. The only concessions he made to fashion at this stage were revealed in his selection of exquisite, one of a kind cotton angavastrams during summer, and meticulously embroidered Kashmiri shawls in winter.

He also began the trend of draping those beauties in a certain way (a la Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore - with the chador worn under the right arm and flung over the left shoulder). Occasionally, he'd slip into his favourite loafers or wear Ferragamo shoes, especially while travelling. But the trademark, perfectly starched and crisply ironed mid-calf kurtas dominated his wardrobe and were rapidly adopted as the unofficial dress code by his Congress

coterie. One can see the trend continuing till today, with Rajiv's boys (well into their sixties, now), still adhering to their late bossman's original dress code.

It was when Rajiv Gandhi travelled overseas that he wowed the world and the well-cut 'Bandgalas' came out in full force - dove grey for morning functions, black for the night. His virgin trip to America, as prime minister, had the international press gasping - as much for his winning speech (the best he ever made), as for his smart, dapper appearance. And yes, he wore a black Bandgala to the White House.

Rajiv Gandhi may not have been a style icon in the Bollywood sense of the term. But he did influence an entire generation of young politicians to groom themselves better. Gone was the era of scruffy, paan-chewing netas dressed in shabby, often stained clothes. Gone also were those dreadful pot bellies, crumpled dhotis and discoloured Gandhi topis (God knows why they were called that, considering Gandhi himself never wore one). If anybody wanted to hang with Rajiv and become a part of his inner circle, it was understood the person had to be well-groomed, polished and attractive. Apart from his Doon School buddies (who also promptly dumped their bespoke Savile Row suits and blazers for the boss-approved khadi gear), even the coquettish ladies in his entourage (and we are not naming them!), were given a major thumbs up for their 'ethnic' fashion sensibilities (Kanjeevaram sarees, kohl-lined eyes, big bindis and strictly no lipstick). Rajiv Gandhi made desi dressing 'cool' by his relaxed, chilled out approach to fashion. His legacy is still evident. Watch those young netas trooping into Parliament - it's pure Rajiv Gandhi 'ishstyle' all the way - down to the designer loafers and prominent pens.

Rajiv Gandhi was the original Mr Bandgala. Arun Nayar was merely a pretender!

## INTELLECTUAL WHORES AND BLOODY BORES

If there's anything and anyone worse than a bloody bore, it's an Intellectual Whore. Puzzled?

Okay ... tell me you really DON'T recognize the following types: The intellectual whores generally hang around at embassy and consulate soirees, clad in dreadful kurtas (both men and women). They have perfected the art of crashing these parties over twenty long years of serious sucking up. That makes them permanent fixtures on lists that rarely get updated, going by the attendance of these cheapo fossils. Some are desperate enough to cultivate each successive social secretary and treat these lower level officers like visiting royalty. It's the sort of treatment those poor sods are entirely unaccustomed to back home. But of course they revel in the importance so lavishly showered on them by these moochers. The only reason for the heavy-duty spongers to turn up night after night at these events is for the free booze and food.

Some have become experts at figuring out menus and alcohol brands on offer from host to host. They turn up their noses at parties hosted by the old East European block of kadka commies who continue to serve cheap vodka and stale sausages. They flock to German evenings for the superior beer and better sausages. The Brits are broke these days and such are the lean times they're facing, even a toast at Queen Lizzie's birthday dinners is raised with

local, lukewarm champagne. No matter. The idea is to go scrounging around for whatever's on offer ... and bore the hell out of everyone present.

Mumbai's intellectual whores fall into another category altogether. They prey on corporate types. They love bankers the most because those guys have amazing expense accounts, plus entertainment budgets and serve rare single malts at their do's. The Mumbai intellectual whore loves to name drop - in the old days it used to be the names of famous artists like M.F. Husain. Now, it's strictly Bollywood. But since the fake 'intellectual' tag has to be lived up to, the intellectual whore throws in social issues and municipal matters to demonstrate the existence of a conscience.

Armchair activism gains a few extra points if the person can confidently 'lagao' something vague about a meeting with the chief minister. If there's an arty, museum connection somewhere, that's still better. A few mentions of an obscure Biennale generally impress the ignorant. All this 'haw haw' talk is interspersed with heavy duty bragging, generally about Delhi connections - Ministry of Culture, Chief Minister Sheila Dikit or Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia. The last two names interest the tight ass bankers present and ensures another round of a 21-year-old Single Malt.

Net-working being the name of the social game (does nobody meet just for the pleasure of spending a pleasant evening together, anymore?), it is vital to use nick names known to the inner circle and then exchange knowing looks with those who 'get it'. Woe betides those who don't! Social death guaranteed. Then comes the worst part - asking for favours. These can include anything from a trip to a foreign destination (with companion), to an out-of-turn allotment for something significant (car, apartment, land). The modus operandi remains the same in both cities. The intellectual

whore stands in a prominent, well lit corner and starts sounding off on the controversy of the day (Niira Radia, Amar Singh, Lalit Modi). Insider gossip (rubbish! It's mostly recycled junk) is traded with a small group over several rounds of whatever is going - after the third drink nobody knows, counts or cares.

The Arty Whores are a breed apart. Their sole purpose in life is to confuse and confound those who may be genuinely interested in understanding art. Their prose is dense, almost impenetrable. They spout dated clichés about assorted European 'movements'. Their pens and the artists' paint brushes they represent are both for sale. Reviews have no validity, nor do their pseudo-intellectual ramblings in pricey catalogues (they charge a whack for writing those dreary, ponderous pieces). You can spot the pompous creeps at art openings, hanging around looking for - you've guessed it - free booze. Once sufficiently tanked up, supremely annoying, mostly inaccurate arty gossip takes over - which canvas sold for how much at the Christie's auction? Which painter is on the make and doing which young, hot art dealer? How art prices are being manipulated by the art sharks? And isn't it terrible what that art bully did with the attractive newbies participating in his art camp?

What do we do with these bores and whores?

Jettison them, of course! Uno, dos, tres ... and out you go!

## HOW ABOUT IT, SIR-JI?

*W*hich language do you people speak in India? Is it called “Errr-du”? asked the dapper foreign gentleman, who had just been introduced to me as the main MAMI man.

I was taken aback. But given the occasion (one of Mumbai’s super-deluxe soirees), I was mentally prepared to meet all types. This bloke was being treated like visiting royalty, and shepherding him around was a prominent socialite. Who on earth was he? I still don’t know, and don’t care. Clearly, he was an ill-informed jerk. I nearly choked on my white wine, while answering politely: ‘Perhaps you are referring to “Urdu” which is widely spoken in Pakistan?’

He looked slightly annoyed, and said: ‘It’s possible. Is English still taught here? Or is it forbidden? Discontinued? Do you write in a native language?’

I didn’t bother to respond. The man obviously did not know when to cut his losses and scoot. He must have been jet-lagged, I reasoned, as he continued the barrage. Someone whispered he was a big noise at the last Mumbai Film Festival. I should have guessed. Because, we had had a rather strange conversation on cinema, specifically on Bollywood. The man had pronounced pompously: ‘Nobody is interested in that sort of mindless song-and-dance genre. If India wants to tap world markets, your films must change.’

‘Oh really? And who the hell are you?’ I pointed out that our films were doing brilliantly across the world.

Bollywood was one of India's top brands internationally. The spectacular success of our films in countless territories was impressive enough to attract top Hollywood studio bosses and several global co-productions, ready to invest serious money. Bollywood was being assiduously wooed by 'all those who matter'. I even threw in a few figures (confession: I made them up).

He snorted dismissively: 'But the overseas' audience mainly consists of other Indians.'

'So? Their opinion doesn't count? Their ticket money is of a different colour?'

'Other people don't relate to your films,' he went on, adding airily, 'You must change the format if you want to succeed.'

That's when I took off. I asked him whether Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger* had changed its format to please western audiences? I pointed out the gigantic domestic market for our films and how we really don't need to pander. Besides, I thundered, what was Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* if not a glorified Bollywood film? And why the hell should we change a highly successful formula that we have always loved, in order to kowtow to the West? Are western film makers saying: 'Oh ... we have a potentially huge market in India. Why don't we make movies that please Indians?' Are Hollywood studios rejigging *Batman* or *Pirates of the Caribbean* to impress desi film fans? Are those guys thinking, 'Maybe, we should try and change our movies around for the humungous Indian market?'

Nobody is saying that, right? Not now, at any rate. But soon, they will. That's when we'll have the last laugh. Just like the Taiwanese and Hong Kong film makers did. Indian film makers should stop trying to accommodate the likes of this rather obnoxious chap who is here as a VIP guest of MAMI. He didn't have a clue about our country, culture,

diversity, music, movies. But he had the audacity to express strong opinions and damn our films. How come? Because he can! Because he knows we'll take it.

After listening to my bhashan on Bollywood, and why Bollywood should never change, the man admitted sheepishly and lamely: 'I never said you should stop making those song-and-dance films. All I am saying is that your film makers should go beyond that genre, and make a different kind of film that speaks a more universal language.'

By then, I was all fired up. 'Have you seen Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*?' I asked, sticking my chin out. He had. He countered: 'Have you seen Deepa Mehta's *Water*?' I hadn't. Advantage Mr. Goatee. He asked a few more condescending questions that left me wondering why we pick such people for our festivals. Worse, why do we give them so much bhav? Our Bollywood extravaganzas are unique! They are completely bizarre. And totally wonderful. We love them for their craziness. We know what we are paying for. We like the absence of logic ... the many absurdities. We worship our stars. And our mad movies have a profound influence on our lives. We don't need to clone the West. We have our own specific identity. A legitimate and highly entertaining genre called The Bollywood Movie. Take it or leave it. But by elevating people like him to important positions at our prestigious film festivals, we downgrade ourselves. This is seriously depressing. Let's stop being so damn defensive and apologetic. Our younger filmmakers are talented and bold. Their movies are speaking a new, creative language that is very much our own. Look at Anurag Kashyap's *Dev-D*, Maneesh Sharma's *Band Baaja Baaraat*, Anand Rai's *Manu Weds Tanu*, Abhinay Deo's *Delhi Belly*, and a few other recent hits that have captured a new audience, but stayed true to themselves and the new urban reality. Bollywood movies have always touched an emotional chord in us;

whether it's a weepy or a nutcase of a film (Raaghav Dar's *My Friend Pinto*). This is what we like. Leave us alone, Mr. Big Noise.

There are several 'gyaan' givers like this gentleman, who show up for such junkets. They know next to nothing about the host country, but are placed in elevated positions, given super fabulous treatment (Indians really do make the best hosts), and while here, they think nothing of talking down to the natives as we hang on to every word and all but prostrate ourselves at their feet.

Nothing personal against this chap. The fact that I didn't bother to ask his name after that 'Err-du' comment, shows my utter lack of interest in the ignoramus. But it did bug me that someone as erudite as a Shyam Benegal would have to put up with this person's inane, superficial commentary during the festival.

Am I being super-touchy? I don't think so. 'Obviously, English is no longer taught in India,' was one of his crass comments. I should have said: 'And obviously, good manners are not taught in yours.' But the annoying asli Indian inside me kicked in, alas: 'He's our mehmaan, jaaney do,' I shrugged. I had given him a pretty hard time.

So, sab theek hai!

## POWER AND SEX ...

*At* a recent Festival of Erotica, I was asked to speak about Power and Sex.

I wanted to alter the title and call it 'Power IS sex'. And this power is not supposed to be gender sensitive. One sees the connection between the two (power and sex) wherever one looks. So it has always been through the ages ... throughout documented history. From Cleopatra's time to now. When a mighty, and highly naughty American general has been caught with his camouflage pants down and a money man called Dominique Kahn Strauss has paid a lowly chamber maid a hefty 'Keep your trap shut' fee (partly borrowed from his understanding wife) all we can do is laugh at these two fools.

These men are the most recent examples of extraordinarily powerful fellows who have behaved in an extraordinarily idiotic way. And one wonders: are the brains of such people actually located in the groin and not inside the cranium? Or, do they do what they do (stake their wealth, position, marriage, family life and career), because they start believing in their own infinite power? Do they behave like pre-pubescent, callow idiots with zero control over those raging hormones in the hope that they'll get away with it - because they are who they are? Really! Isn't that seriously dumb?

Instances of women misusing high office are not unknown, but how many such women exist in the world?

And let's not start counting. We'll be able to compile the list in under fifteen minutes and count the ladies on the fingers of our hands. While it is true that there have been documented instances of sexual harassment at the work place where a woman is the boss lady, these are again pretty scanty given the pathetic number of boss ladies floating around to start with.

I have an interesting theory: Men who taste a huge amount of power get an equally huge sexual kick out of it. They acquire confidence in abundance. In fact, in such abundance that even their own reflection in the mirror lies to them. They see themselves as Hercules, Atlas, Bradley Cooper, Brad Pitt, Salman Khan, Adonis, Shiva all rolled into one. Their self image goes into stratosphere and after that happens, there's no stopping them. I mean, look at Dominique or General David Petraeus. Neither is a Greek God. Sorry to say this, but which woman would willingly want to bed either of these two sad specimens? Are they that stupid to think gorgeous ladies are falling head over in heels with their ... err ... personality? Prowess in bed?

The startling answer is - yes! I have watched absolute toads in action, hitting on women across the board, convinced it was their physical attractiveness the gals were succumbing to. I have noted the contemptuous expression in the eyes of the women playing this dangerous game as they flatter these toads and lead them on ... to their eventual (and deserved) doom. I have sympathized with the long suffering wives cringing on the sidelines. That's how power affects certain men.

Funny, but powerful women generally pay for success with their sexuality. They swiftly lose it! They cannot afford to be seen as sexually active creatures once they are in that hot seat. For such women, power provides those elusive orgasms. They no longer need a man for that basic pleasure.

It is rare to come across a really serious Power Lady who regards power as an aphrodisiac. Most such women wind down sexually and focus all their energies on getting ahead in their chosen fields.

There is also that little statistic that has to do with age. Women who get to the top are generally on the other side of thirty-five, if not older. Their sex drive at this critical stage is not at its most aggressive, in any case. If they want 'it' and don't have the time or energy for it, they are not about to curl up and die of frustration. Men who are in a position to get it up and get 'it' even at the age of seventy and over, will rarely pass up ... or lie back and think of their country instead.

Are things about to change? Who knows? There is all that useless talk about Cougars on the prowl. About predatory women who behave like Strauss Kahn and worse. I am not convinced. When was the last time we heard about a majorly successful female executive attacking a butler in her hotel suite? In her position, what she's likely to want more - much more - than instant sex with a stranger, is some quiet time and sleep! Both are in short supply. And a whole lot cheaper, too!

## JUMP! AND SAVE YOURSELF...

 had no idea that the Mumbai police had started a seventeen-member Hostage & Crisis Negotiation Team last year, till I read about the timely intervention of Shalini Sharma, a team member, who talked a seventeen-year-old girl out of jumping from the seventh floor of her building in Bandra.

In her interview with a local tabloid, Shalini recounted the two-and-a-half hour ordeal, during which her training (at Scotland Yard, no less) was tested. She said the team specializes in decoding the body language of the 'target'. In this case, she found the suicidal girl looking angry and confused. There was no time to waste. Shalini launched into what is termed 'calculated bargaining'. Over an hour of skillful negotiations later, Shalini came up with a brainwave and managed to hand over a cell phone to the panic stricken girl. After that, it was comparatively easy.

The thing that struck me about this incident is how vulnerable our young are today. And how we have failed to recognize their fragility. As Shalini pointed out after the girl was rescued: 'All she wanted was someone to talk to ....' Obviously, nobody had been listening to her cries for help for a long, long time ... not her family, not even her friends.

Loneliness is going to be the new killer in urban India. But we have yet to wake up to the seriousness of the condition. The bold and sad truth of the matter is that there

are more and more terminally lonely people in our cities than ever before. And nobody has the time for them. We used to pride ourselves on providing support to those most in need of it - our youth and the elderly. Today, both are in the same boat - marginalized, neglected and ignored. The young feel diminished and degraded. The elderly, unwanted and useless.

Clinical depression is on the rise, but we fail to identify it for what it is - an illness. We get impatient and angry if someone close to us withdraws and sinks into a deep, dark well of negative emotions. Especially if that person appears fine in all other respects - physically fit, energetic and educated. We accuse such people of faking their condition. Of being lazy. Of seeking attention. Of behaving 'badly'. The elderly have little choice but to put up with the taunts of those around them. But the young demonstrate rage and give vent to frustration. That is when suicides happen. Cornered and filled with despair, only one solution presents itself - instant death. How tragic!

We remain unsympathetic and callous even when faced with such a drastic situation. Rarely do parents of disturbed teens turn the spotlight on themselves to ask: 'Where did I fail my child?' Sometimes, this introspection comes a bit too late in the day. In the case successfully handled by Shalini Sharma, I continue to fear for the girl. She may have been saved this one time. But who's to say she won't attempt something similar in future? And if that happens Shalini Sharma may not be around to negotiate with the troubled teen and persuade her to get off that dangerous ledge. We don't want to bother with the delicate state of such a person's mind. We don't know whether or not her family is happy to see her alive after the ordeal. What if she is told as much? Imagine the irony of it all. To start with, there was nobody to talk to. Leaping off the ledge seemed

like the only way out. Then came a savior. But there was still nobody to talk to! What happens in such a grim scenario? I shudder to think.

For the young, unhappy children of our society, family still remains the primary source of love and comfort. Friends follow. But all that is rapidly changing. Friends have replaced family in a lot of metros. Friends seem to have more time and better understanding of problems. Working parents often need therapy themselves, unable as they frequently are to cope with their own problems. Grandparents no longer live with the family. The larger circle of aunts, uncles and cousins does not exist. Teachers of the old school who actually cared about the emotional state of their students disappeared with the dinosaurs. An abiding sense of rejection ('Nobody sends me Friend requests on FB') supersedes virtually everything else. The world appears hostile and dangerous. What does a young person do in such a nightmarish situation? Look for that welcoming ledge. And jump.

## LIFE BEGINS AT 80...!

'I want to live my life in a fully "bindaas" way ....'

This is not a statement made by a sexy Bollywood starlet, but by a lady who is well into her eighties. She lives in the locality and we share a masseuse. The big difference being that the common *maalishwalli* is booked by me just once a week for a Sunday massage. It is the one weekly indulgence I greatly look forward to. But the octogenarian widow is so hooked on the masseuse's magic fingers, she uses her expert services for two leisurely hours, 365 days of the year, starting as early as 5.30 a.m.

And mind you, this is not a therapeutic massage intended to provide relief to arthritic joints. It is more a relaxing pummeling of tired muscles, designed to take care of urban stress. But for the merry widow, it is what kick starts her busy day. Once she is done with the pampering in a special spa-style room in her luxury apartment (complete with aroma candles and lounge music), the lady hits her home gym, works out with a personal trainer, and plans lunch at her favourite restaurant or club. Her wardrobe is contemporary and expensive. She has several fashion designers at her beck and call, and prefers her outfits customized. Her salon treatments (hair, facials, nails) take up the rest of the afternoon ... and then it's time for an evening aperitif and dinner.

You may be wondering where the family fits in? Aha! It doesn't! This is the interesting part.

Soon after her businessman husband died, leaving a substantial portion of his wealth to his widow, their three sons decided to claim what they believed was rightfully their share (over and above what the Will stated). From this point on, the story follows a predictable track - haughty daughters-in-law demanding more and more and more, with the bullying sons exerting enormous pressure on the old girl to sell the spacious flat and move into a small apartment. To her credit, she flatly refused to buckle, arguing it was her late husband's wish to see her live well and enjoy his money till the very end. And that was that!

The miffed sons promptly broke off further contact with their old mother once they discovered she wouldn't play ball and pay up. On her part, she decided to reorganize her schedule, rejig her priorities and enjoy her life to the hilt on her own. Today, she has a support system of close friends, a couple of neighbours who look out for her, and of course, family retainers to take care of creature comforts. She is cheerful and full of enthusiasm as she plans short travels to hill stations and pilgrimage destinations across India. She looks no more than 65, with good skin, her own teeth and long hair. She knows her sons are waiting for her to die before they swoop down and grab everything in sight. Perhaps, what they haven't factored in so far is their mother's will power. She has seen through their selfishness and avarice.

Here's a lady who also makes time to educate girls from underprivileged backgrounds. She may also have ear marked money for various other charities she supports. Since she relies on the kindness of strangers, who knows, some fortunate 'ajnabi' may be at the receiving end of her generosity. But till the time for her to say 'adieu' to the

world comes, she is making the most of her privileges. Like several widows I know in the city, she has come into her own after her husband's death. She also has the wisdom to recognize the futility of keeping up appearances. If her sons have abandoned her, so be it. She will not resort to martyrdom or victimhood in order to conform to society's fake expectations. Boldly and bravely, she is going it alone. In an environment that is increasingly materialistic and openly hostile to senior citizens ('Why do these oldies have to live forever ...?'), here is a gutsy woman who refuses to slip away quietly or surrender her rights.

I love her for loving life! For not giving up on herself. For deciding to live on her own terms. There is no time to brood or dwell on depressing family truths. She has sensibly eliminated such toxins from her life. It's a pity these 'toxins' happen to be her flesh and blood. I thought of her before falling asleep last night. My dreams were indeed pleasant. And I woke up with a smile! May she rock on!

## TOO HANDSOME FOR HIS OWN GOOD!

*H*ere's a small test: Who is Omar Borkan Al Gala?

If that name rings a bell, chances are you are a twenty-something, net-savvy female. I stumbled across the name and image of this person when I noticed my youngest daughter's status. It read 'Yummy!' This single word was positioned under a photograph of a staggeringly good looking young Arab with a rakish half-smile and fussily trimmed beard. I confess I was a little startled by her open admission of ... shall we say, unadulterated lust? I decided to conduct my own 'research' and discovered more about this international headline grabber.

Omar shot to fame after he was anointed the most desired poster boy du jour by females across the globe. This was right after being thrown out of the annual Jenadrivah Heritage & Cultural Festival in Riyadh. His 'crime'? His incredible good looks! Authorities feared this young guy (and two other men) were a bit too attractive, too hot to handle, for the delicate local ladies at the Festival! That is just so hilarious! What did the organizers imagine? That women in droves would attack these hunks? Molest them? Rob them of their virtue? Oooooh! The terrible weakness of out-of-control, lustful women. Ha!

Surely this incident marks an international first? I cannot recall another occasion when a man was penalized for his amazing looks! It's another matter that Omar Borkan has

shot to global fame overnight and become an obsession across continents! He has been promptly grabbed by international showbiz agents ready to flog his recent super celebrity status and make big bucks out of it. A movie role and more ....

Years ago, I had a really fun night in London at what was then considered a pretty risqué men's striptease club in Soho. It was a riot! There were at least six bachelorette parties in full swing that evening, which meant it was a crowd of exaggeratedly rowdy (read: inebriated) women, whistling and hooting each time a new act opened on the small stage. The 'act' didn't go beyond a bunch of musclemen stripping off their clothes to throbbing music. As each item of clothing was peeled off, there were prolonged shrieks from the ladies. Since there were six brides in the audience, the strippers made sure to come up and give each one a special treat (let's leave out details!). Some of those men were seriously well endowed and good looking (think John Abraham and Akshay Kumar playing male escorts in *Desi Boyz*). High spirited ladies were placing bids and wondering how much it would cost to take a couple of these fellows home. It was taken in the right spirit - no offence meant, none taken. At the end of the show, most women staggered off to the nearest bar to giggle some more ... and prolong the innocent madness of the evening.

Saudi Arabia is a different destination. And this is not to compare cultures or judge them. It is just amusing to note the high levels of male suspicion and fear in Riyadh. While pretending to 'protect' local women from swooning at the feet of these men and surrendering to Adonis-like predators from across the border, the organizers were in fact displaying their own paranoia and insecurity. One wonders to what extent they'll go in future to ensure good looking guys stay away from Riyadh? Will they scan submitted pictures before

issuing passes? Will there be an all male screening committee at the venue scrutinizing visitors and sifting Greek Gods from ornery hoi polloi? Will they come up with a tax on good looks?

What about the women? Nobody knows their views. Have they admitted their weakness and confessed they were unable to concentrate on a thing with Omar and his pals prowling the grounds? Poor, deprived women. Can something similar happen in India? Heaven forbid!

My eyes are peeled. I am looking out for Omar sightings. Where will this dishy guy in a dash pop up next? My curiosity has peaked. I have noticed my daughter's fresh updates featuring a whole new set of Omar images. With each new photo session, he changes his fashionable head gear. From blood red to dune brown. His kohl-lined eyes smoulder and smoke at the lens. He is looking like a million bucks - and probably charging as much. We have countless Omars in India. Fortunately, nobody dares stop us from drooling - yes - even in public. Arjun Rampal has just topped the polls as 2012's Most Desirable Man. Arjun's gorgeous. But Omar is better. He should definitely come to India. He'll be welcomed with open arms. Most of them female. But, why leave out equally besotted men?

## 26 WAYS TO BE HAPPY

*L*et me give you the good news first: It is possible to be happy. Yes, even in today's times, when the odds are stacked so heavily against happiness.

There is a catch to being happy, I must warn you. And it is this: In order to achieve happiness, a person first has to want to be happy. Desire it. Identify it. And acknowledge as much. When was the last time you - yes, you - thought about being happy? Actually sat down and said to yourself: 'I want to be happy.' Sounds simple? Foolish? Think about it ... I did. And this very elementary statement of a very fundamental desire, made me acutely aware of my own state of mind at that point (restless, irritable, intolerant). Once I'd identified the basics (happiness-generators), I then went about discarding most of the causes that stood in the way of my achieving this really, really underrated condition that we take so much for granted but barely understand. We assume everybody else in the world is happy but us. We also assume everybody's idea of happiness is more or less the same as our own. We focus excessively on things that don't make us happy, rather than on those that do. It becomes a vicious cycle of regurgitating all that annoys, rather than a remembrance of all the uplifts. During the past few years, I noticed that I had started to frown more and smile less! How awful ... that's when I said to myself: 'It's time to take stock ... starting now!'

But first, I had to regress ... become a child again. Or rather, rediscover the child in me. The little girl who used to laugh a lot, often for no apparent reason. The same one who possessed an insatiable curiosity about nearly every aspect of everyday life. The pony-tailed teenager who'd rush out of the house to dance in the rain, and talk to the moon because it was smiling. When was the last time I'd stopped to stare with fascination at a particularly pretty autumn leaf ... a painting ... or listen to snatches of a long forgotten song? Today, I'm fortunate enough to have the resources to buy some of the things I used to dream about owning as a young person. But do I have the time to enjoy them? I glance at my pricey wrist watch and realize it just sits on my wrist as the hours fly ... I've stopped noticing its classic lines and sophisticated mechanism. Imagine the irony of it all.

We spend years lustng after material objects that are supposed to enhance our lives in tangible ways, but in reality, by the time we acquire these goodies and revel in our well-earned lifestyle perks, we are either too blasé, too exhausted or ... this is the worst ... too ill to appreciate our good luck! That's when reality checks kick in. For a lot of prosperous men, the trappings of success (multiple cars, great homes, impressive whiskies on the bar, rare cognacs, Cuban cigars, a choice of young bed partners ...) oh, all that they may have fantasized about during their lean and mean youth, it's right there, waiting to be devoured. Damn. If only the by-pass surgery hadn't taken the fun out of the promised adventure. Imagine ... a single stroke of a pen on a cheque can change one's life as drastically as an entirely different kind of medical stroke that can kill in an instant, too.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling especially philosophical, I transport myself mentally to my adored beach in Goa. I recall all those magical moments, lying on a deck chair, feeding papayas to stray cows, snoozing lazily, sipping chilled

coconut water, reading in a desultory fashion and enjoying the warmth of a winter sun on my bare shoulders. Later, much later, while locating my flip-flops half-buried in the sand, a strange realization shakes me out of my temporary stupor. It's the sand that does it ... all those millions of tiny grains, only to be impatiently shaken off. I look down at my toes and laugh. One day, I too shall be reduced to less than that grain of sand. So shall we all. How foolish and worthless our vanities appear in such a chilling context. I promptly straighten my shoulders and look skywards ... same story. In this vast and mysterious universe, who and what are we? Not even the tiniest of tiny specks. It is such a liberating moment. I generally throw my head back and laugh at the absurdity of existence. For a few days that follow, I follow my heart, not head. It's reassuring to know that's still possible. I listen to plaintive Goan mandos and feel deliciously emotional. Charlie Brown was so right when he declared: 'Happiness is a sad song ...'

Before starting to write this piece, I made a list of what it was that makes my heart soar. Topping it was 'Family'. I guess 99 per cent of the people in the world would readily agree. No family, no joy. In India, we still believe in the deeply nurturing aspects of a fulfilling family life. We continue to value the concept of 'kutumb'. It is where we seek our deepest emotions ... it is where we retreat when we need comfort. I cannot think of happiness without the love and warmth that family provides. Starting there, I'd like to share my 26 key tips for finding (and keeping) the universe's most elusive, most desired emotional state - happiness. These basic, uncomplicated guidelines have helped me. At least a few of them are bound to help you. For, as a stressed out banker-friend trustingly asked me: 'At the end of the day, every human being wants just one thing - to be happy. Right?' Yup. Absolutely right!

1. **Learn to Let Go:** Easier said than done. But it is possible. Baggage weighs you down, makes you miserable. What's the point of going over the minutiae of a relationship that has soured? It could be with a lover or a business associate. Once it's over, it's over. Move on. Take your time to come to terms with the break. But don't keep brooding once you have made the decision to part. This applies equally to a bad experience with a stranger who may have duped you. Learn from it, but discard the negative emotion generated by the memory. It serves zero purpose. The only thing that works in a break up is a clinical incision that cuts neatly and permanently. Remember, sutures heal. A festering wound, oozes.
2. **Be Selfish. Be Vain:** Ask anyone: 'Do you lead a selfish life?' Or, 'Are you vain?' and the person will hotly deny it. We all like to see ourselves as generous people who help others. But in reality, most of us only help those who can help us! I have taken the best lessons out of Ayn Rand's remarkable treatise titled *The Virtue of Selfishness*. If you don't give your own self priority, if you don't look after your health, appearance and well being, you can't make anyone around you happy either. Being 'constructively selfish' is very different from being mean and self-centred. Similarly, vanity is not just about narcissism; it extends well beyond that narrow definition. As a responsible person, you owe it to yourself to eat smart, live smart, look good. If your self image is positive, you will convey positive vibes to those around you. A frustrated, embittered person who refuses to address the issues that lead to a negative approach, will find it difficult to overcome life's many hurdles. Invest in yourself - because you are worth it!

3. **Slow Down:** I completely mean that, even if I don't adhere to it myself. I know I'm pushing the pace, I know I need to cut the speed ... but I say helplessly: 'I can't!' Rubbish. There is nothing that compelling ... nothing that can't be kept on hold. And yet, here I am lunatically hurtling towards some self-defined goal. What on earth for? I see countless clones around me making the same mistake. Often, I 'advise' them to take a break. But what about my own crazy schedule? The good part is I am aware of my punishing routine. Chances are I'll fix it soon. Wish me luck!
4. **Express Gratitude:** Articulate your feelings when someone does you a good turn. Don't take it for granted that people owe it to you to be 'nice'. This is entirely untrue. Goodness and grace, especially with no strings attached, need to be recognised, at least in your own busy heart. Ideally, write the person a warm and sincere note appreciating the gesture. Pick up the phone ... send a text. These are life's unexpected moments; make sure you remain tuned in to them.
5. **Listen With Your Heart, Not Just Your Ears:** So often we pretend to be listening, our ears hear the words being spoken, but our hearts are elsewhere, and nothing really registers later. What an insult to the person doing the talking. The problem for this is not a lack of interest in the other's concerns; it is a lack of time. Our attention spans have shrunk to an extent we no longer invest even a bit of our precious micro-seconds on another's situation, unless it directly impacts our own! Matlab ki baat hai. Cacophony has replaced conversation. Selective deafness dominates social intercourse.
6. **Teach Yourself to Trust:** Agreed the world isn't the most amazing place, but it isn't all that terrible either.

These days, suspicion rules. We are constantly looking over our shoulders to see who's carrying a knife ... the same one that will stab us in the back the moment our attention gets diverted. Husbands and wives play cat-and-mouse games. Siblings don't trust each other, children accuse their parents of vile acts, and parents are wary of their kids. Isn't that sad? Forget business partnerships where nobody trusts anybody. It appears as if we are all lone warriors ready to attack at the first sign of aggression. But the minute you surrender your doubts and stop being cynical, you realize just how many wonderful people there are out there, who may actually risk their own lives to save yours!

- 7. Touch and Go:** Really, that's all it needs - one tiny touch before you get busy. Just that hurried physical contact with someone you care for is enough to last several hours and offer comfort. We have stopped hugging one another ... why, we rarely hug our own children. No wonder India's Hugging Saint has become a world-wide phenomenon. She has tapped into a vacant space and found countless takers. Everyone needs to be hugged, stroked, embraced, cuddled, kissed, caressed. Even a pet at home demands a pat of appreciation. Imagine then what we are missing out on? Forget hugging, we no longer make direct eye contact. Isn't that sad? Make it a point to demonstrate your affection by reaching out briefly - at least once a day ... it's worth the effort many times over. If nothing else works, hire a masseur for a more professional 'touch'.
- 8. Stop Being a Control Freak:** Of course, we all want to stay on top of our lives and all that. But at what cost? Cardiac arrest? Hypertension? I am the first one to admit, I get disoriented if I am not in control of my

time and activities. I realize it's a dumb thing to do, and am actively addressing the syndrome. I spot similar victims around me. How silly are we to think we can actually control anything! Being reasonably organized is one thing. Being obsessive about it, another. I'm striving to find the right balance. So should you.

9. **Shut Up:** That's right. Keep quiet. Not every argument needs a resolution. Life is more than a game of one upmanship. Often, there is more charm and satisfaction in holding one's peace, especially if tempers are running high. If one person backs off and stays quiet, chances are the argument itself loses steam and fizzles out. In retrospect, the whole thing looks absurd and exaggerated, anyway. So, why not be the bigger person, and back off?
10. **Have a Heart:** This is about compassion, yes. But on a more selfish level, it is about following your heart, too. If your heart isn't in what you do, walk away. You cannot succeed in either a career or a relationship that you aren't embracing - whole-heartedly. Imagine being stuck in a job or a marriage that only gives you grief! What for? As the cliché goes, life is way too short to throw it away on activities that are devoid of joy. The minute you opt for something or someone you love, you will succeed. The heart has its reasons ... as Pascal wrote years ago. Listen to it ....
11. **Count:** No, not just your blessings (which you should and must), but count ... as in 1-2-3-4-5, before you make an important decision, or lose your temper. Believe me, counting has saved many a job and marriage! The trick is to remember to do so ... on time! Counting slowly and with concentration, buys time, and that, as any skillful negotiator will tell you, ensures you have the advantage, while your opponent fumes. It's not important to win

every debate. But the fragile state of your arteries? Now, that's important.

**12. Confide:** Secrecy has its uses. But so does a confession. Confidantes come with in-built risks, unless you are blessed enough to stumble upon a friend or a family elder you can trust. While it isn't all that easy to find such persons, it's worth taking a chance with someone who inspires a certain level of confidence ... enough for you to get a few things off your chest, and feel lighter. In these ultra-paranoid times, we tend to keep everything bottled up, afraid that even a small slip up will be used against us by the very person(s), who has feigned sympathy and interest in the problem. Well ... so be it! You win some and lose some. Betrayal can be devastating. But it's still better to seek advice by sharing those troubling problems than living with a constant feeling of being choked.

**13. Compliment People:** Why stinge on praise? Who doesn't like to be appreciated? Walk up to the person who has earned your respect, and say so. It costs nothing, but goes a long way in the long run. Never be fake in this regard, for soon you'll be found out. There's nothing more annoying than discovering a double-faced hypocrite, who lays it on when face-to-face and trashes you when your back is turned. Say it when you mean it. But say it! Recognizing someone else's gifts will make you a better person automatically.

**14. Extend Help:** If you find yourself in a situation where your intervention would lead to a positive outcome, go ahead and extend your hand. Don't walk away when you see someone in distress. Make a phone call, if nothing else. Often, summoning help (police, doctor, ambulance), can make the difference between life and death. Surely, you'll hate yourself later for not doing

something when you could? We have become far too indifferent and insular to the suffering of fellow beings - nobody wants to get 'involved'. Why not? Only cowards walk away from a crisis. Intervening in a crisis ought to be an obligation for anybody caught in such a situation. You must do whatever is needed at that point to aid the victim. Remember, it could be you, lying there bleeding on the road while people jump over your prone body and leave you to die.

- 15. Grow a Garden:** You don't need acres of space to achieve this - a small patch will do. And if even that is not available, get yourself a few hardy indoor plants. Most Indian homes keep a Tulsi on the kitchen windowsill. Apart from the traditional significance, Tulsi's medicinal properties are well-documented. Given the sensitive nature of my throat, and the high pollution levels in Mumbai, I scrupulously chew five Tulsi leaves dipped in honey, first thing in the morning. My throat has been behaving ever since I started the routine. My own little garden at home is very precious to me, and hugely therapeutic. On days when I wake up feeling blah, and I see the hibiscus in full bloom, my spirits soar at the beautiful sight. Taking care of plants makes you feel responsible for life itself. Tending rose bushes, or merely watering lucky bamboos, is an act that is strangely satisfying, especially when it yields results. I take the arrival of each new leaf of the Frangipani as a personal victory!
- 16. Cry Your Eyes Out:** Go on ... it's such a great feeling. There's nothing as de-stressing as a really good cry. Don't make it a habit, though. Save up those tears for something worthy. But once they start, don't stop them. We have forgotten how to cry! We have no time to shed those clogged up tears. In the process, we have let our

tear ducts dry up, so when we really, really need to let go, nothing emerges from those dry, cold eyes. I cry very easily, much to the embarrassment of my family. Why, I even cry while watching the stupidest Bollywood film. But mainly, it's music that makes me cry. And beauty. The helplessness and trust of innocent children has the same effect. As do sunsets ... and the goodness of strangers.

Men suppress their tears because society doesn't endorse them. I think the world would be a far better, less aggressive place if men were to cry more than they do at present. I want to tell them, real men do, and should, cry. It makes men more human. And therefore, more attractive. Let the 'kerchiefs do their job, guys - cry away. And feel happy doing so!

17. **Eat, Drink and be Merry:** Yup. But make sure you do so minus guilt. Eating each meal with enthusiasm and gusto does not make you a glutton! Food - whether it's comfort food or a gourmet meal - is the provider of elementary but immense pleasure. To remain indifferent to the everyday act of eating is to deny yourself a great source of happiness. No matter what's on your thali, if you pay attention to it, respect the person who has cooked it, and engage yourself fully in the act of eating itself, on a very conscious level, you will automatically find yourself getting drawn into a more sensual world, experiencing something vivid and wonderful. Great food has great recall. Remembering memorable meals is a pleasure in itself.

Aah, when it comes to drink, to each his own. If you like your alcohol, consume it sans pressure. There is no point in being a closet drinker, which can lead to clinical depression. Drink when you are in the mood, drink with people you feel comfortable with, drink if you

want to celebrate. But don't drink if you think alcohol takes away sorrow. For, all it does is compound it.

As for being merry - that's easy! Good food, good wine and good company - what's your excuse?

18. **Music:** You know why it is called the balm for the soul? Because music alone has the ability to calm, soothe, heal, restore - and music asks for nothing in return, not even a 'thank you'! One of the best, most thoughtful birthday gifts I received was from my friend Gitaah (God bless her!). Being a singer and a music lover, who has frequently transported audiences through her gift (What a voice! Where does it come from?), Gitaah took the immense trouble to load over 300 of my very special songs and tracks on a dinky little iPod, before presenting it to me with a sweet and affectionate note on a recent birthday. I was so touched, so thrilled and so moved, I couldn't stop weeping ... or singing! The iPod has since become my best friend and most favoured stress-buster.

Apart from any therapeutic value it provides, the sheer, unadulterated pleasure of surrendering to music, be it Elvis Presley, Bhimsen Joshi, A.R. Rahman or Tchaikovsky, makes me feel one with the divine. It also makes me acutely aware of the fact that I had downgraded music in my silly list of priorities for way too long. I am delighted to report it is now back where it belongs - right up there with the few priceless treasures I most value. These days, listening to the most mindless Bollywood dance tracks on my priceless present brings an instant smile to the lips ... my feet start tapping and life itself appears as gaudy and unreal as the Bollywood film, *Om Shanti Om!*

19. **Money Madness:** Agreed. Moolah helps. Big moolah helps hugely, but can it save a lost soul? We all need

money. But do we need to chase it at the cost of all else - health, family, fun? When was the last time you stopped running after a monetary goal and said to yourself: 'To hell with that extra buck in the bank, I'm going to a movie.' Try suggesting that to a young person and see the expression of utter and total disbelief on the face: 'Are you mad? Have you lost it? The markets are opening in New York/Hong Kong/Tokyo ... there's so much riding on the dollar ... and you want me to miss out on a possible killing?'

But what about missing out on life? A walk in the rain? When was the last time you stopped to watch a sunset? Heard a bird sing? Admired a painting? Whistled an old, forgotten tune? In our mindless pursuit of wealth and status, we are cheating ourselves of simple, everyday pleasures that once recharged our batteries and energized us in a jiffy.

Money has become sexier than sex itself! The biggest turn on for a generation that foolishly believes plastic makes the impossible, possible. 'Have credit card, will over-spend' is the mantra that provides all the orgasms. Soon credit cards may replace condoms. The sickness of compulsive consumerism is catching on rapidly. The only thing that can save us is reconnecting ... with one another, and our past.

20. **Learn to Lose:** It's really ok to not win every single time. And it's also ok to feel terrible when you lose. But feeling terrible and giving in to depression or feelings of low self-worth is not the same thing. Losing with grace is an art in itself. Knowing when to quit, is another. Nobody stays ahead of the game permanently. Win some, lose some - that's how it goes. And always will. Losing to an opponent who deserves to win, is easy. But

conceding defeat to a duffer can be a killer. Losing with one's dignity intact, provides a different high, and if you can achieve the feat, you emerge a stronger person.

Lose with a smile, even if at that point all you want to do is cry. I remember how devastated I felt during an inter-school athletics championship, when our relay time lost to a rival school because of a clumsy baton pass. That tiny error cost us the coveted shield. We were shattered and upset, till our games teacher told us to cheer up and smile. What about, we asked glumly. She just grinned and said: 'Because people look their best when they are able to rise above defeat.' Brilliant! Had she added to our despondency at that point by chastising us, we would have reveled in it, but by providing an inspirational message, she made us feel instantly better about ourselves. We went back the next year determined to regain the trophy - and did just that!

21. **Re-prioritise:** So you think you have it all neatly wrapped up? All loose ends tied? Every moment accounted for? You believe you are genuinely on top of your time? And on top of your life? You have, if not all, at least most of the answers. Why, you even have a 'Plan-B' in place incase the original one doesn't work out.

Well ... guess what? Life has a nasty way of pulling the plug on the best laid plans. It's called the unpredictability factor. Out of the blue, disaster strikes - a mate dies; a child falls seriously sick; a sibling is diagnosed with a terminal illness; financial disaster hits you; an accident occurs .... Oh, so many ghastly things can take place without prior intimation. A plane crash, floods, fire, earthquake ... look at what happened after the tsunami, or 9/11?

Nothing ever prepares you for the far reaching consequences of unexpected crises. When questioned,

so many people the world over have defined the moment that changed their perspectives permanently and made them pause, re-assess - as the one when they were forced to confront death! All of them have said more or less the same thing - money, and the mad pursuit of it - was the first 'priority' to recede. What use is money in the face of tragedy ... death ... failing health? As our elders often say: 'No health equals no wealth'.

Money is only as important as you make it. If it enslaves you, your peace of mind is gone forever. There are times I watch wealthy people during their 'off' moments. Say, in an aircraft. I see their anxious expressions, faces crumpled up with tension, frown lines criss-crossing already furrowed foreheads. And I feel intensely sorry for their plight. I know they have brought it on themselves. They have chosen to be where they are. But at what cost? They first make millions. Then they spend millions in order to remain healthy and calm enough to enjoy those millions. Make any sense? Not to me.

Right now, young India is in the grip of Money Fever. Ask any 20-something what he/she wants to do, and the prompt response is - make money. Preferably, overnight. We worship our millionaires and billionaires. We devour news about their latest acquisitions. Corporate jets, fancy yachts ... we love their lifestyle. But do we also love their life? If we look carefully behind the public mask, there is abject loneliness and sorrow. Disillusionment and defeat. So many top honchos, sick of the tyranny of their extreme lives, decide to opt out. But I genuinely believe you don't have to head for the Himalayas in search of salvation. A successful person appreciates the value of balance in life. There is no need to run away

from responsibility. To renounce. The solution does not lie in taking ‘sanyas’. All you need is a periodic, good, hard look at those life-goals. Be honest with yourself: how badly do you want that raise, new car, farm house, holiday abroad? How much are you willing to give up in order to achieve that distant goal? What about the quality of your life? Do you rest well at night? When was the last time you felt totally relaxed, without the aid of alcohol? When did you make love without keeping one eye on the clock? Are you guilty of bringing the laptop and Blackberry into the bedroom? Have play stations replaced parenting in your family? It is never about how much wealth you have – it is about what you do with it. Cardiac arrest or crores in the bank? The choice is yours.

**22. Sleep:** Sounds simple, and therefore unimportant. But do you know that women in particular, go through life in a state of serious sleep deprivation? That most of them never ever ‘catch up’ on lost slumber? Have you also wondered why international researchers spend so much time and money going into the intricacies of sleep disturbances these days? It’s because scientists have discovered the far-reaching devastation caused by insufficient sleep ... and the picture isn’t looking good.

A charged up female executive I met in Delhi, told me she had turned into an insomniac due to the demanding nature of her work. She finds herself tossing and turning in bed, hours after switching off the lights: ‘I can’t wait for the morning ... I am unable to relax ... I am addicted to stress!’ She claims she has tried it all – meditation, deep breathing exercises, yoga, a shot of cognac, a glass of milk, a warm bath ... even boring books. Nothing works. Her mind is in overdrive, she is over wrought, and she resents the hours ‘wasted’ in sleep. Phew! The consequences have been terrible – she has no friends, no

family life, and no leisure. She falls sick more often than she cares to admit, and any suggestion that she needs to slow down, is met with a derisive, dismissive snort.

Well, here's an admission: while listening to her story, I found several echoes in my own life. I too underestimate the healing value of sleep and tend to push myself long after the world has called it a day. I abhor afternoon siestas, even though I know how restful they are (ten years ago, I couldn't do without my post-lunch nap). I feel guilty and wretched on the rare occasions when I cat-nap. I also feel frustrated when I watch the rest of my family sleeping peacefully. Like the driven executive, I too am crippled by the thought that I'm 'wasting time' by sleeping. But at least, I am aware of my short-sightedness and plan to address it soon.

Babies and puppies look wonderful because they sleep most of the time! We have to wake up to the fact that eight hours of sleep restores us more effectively than all those multi-vits we pop. Let's learn a little from the Latinos who eat well, drink well, sleep well ... and make time for love.

- 23. Dance:** Sometime back, I attended Shiamak Davar's amazing musical revue titled *I Believe*. I have watched Shiamak grow into a consummate performer over the past 25 years. But more than that, I have seen him use dance as a movement that transforms lives. It is inspirational and exhilarating to see how energetically Shiamak has spread the message of love, peace, harmony by getting everybody to get up and dance, regardless of any consideration. You don't need to be young, slim, supple, sexy or hot. You don't have to wear a leotard or make-up. You only have to get to your feet and sway to the beat. Anybody can do that - even someone with two left feet!

Shiamak's approach to dance is spiritual and uplifting, as is evident from his inclusive style of teaching. Whether the participant is in a wheel chair, or otherwise physically challenged, Shiamak designs a role that accommodates each disability, without the person feeling in the least patronized or pitied. Dance with Dignity is his message. And it works.

Free style dancing is easy ... unlike classical dance forms that require training, discipline and talent. Dancing for the love of dancing, frees you from self-consciousness, even if you think you lack the grace and rhythm to move to the music. Who cares? You aren't going to be judged. And you aren't being watched. It's not *Nach Baliye* and you should tell yourself to just let go... whirl, twirl, jump and swirl. If you prefer dancing with other people, why not enroll for Dancercise classes? Sweat it out ... trust me, it's far more fun than hours spent on a treadmill. Go for it ... if 50 Cent and hip-hop tracks do it for you, shake that leg, move those hips ... shake, rattle and roll.

- 24. Daan:** Charity does not begin and end with writing a fat cheque and sitting back smugly thinking you've done something commendable. Giving, in the true sense, goes beyond donating money. It involves giving of yourself. Sharing time and emotions, interests and ideas. It's about real enrichment of yourself, and others who can benefit from your experience. There is a beautiful word called 'daan', which defies accurate translation. 'Daan' is an all-encompassing act that includes kindness and compassion, as much as donations and gifts.

Serving the less fortunate, in whichever capacity, makes you aware of your own good fortune, fills you with grace and gratitude, humility and joy. It doesn't have to be a grand gesture. Not everyone is Warren Buffet or

Bill Gates - but look at their examples. Even an everyday act of concern, a reaching out to someone who needs help, is in itself a fulfilling way of compensating for an otherwise self-centered existence. I know people who volunteer time and effort, working with cancer afflicted children, most of them terminally ill. Each hospital visit drains them completely. Yet, they go back, week after week because they know within themselves that their precious time is best served with children who have very little of that precise commodity themselves.

The world is waking up to the pure joy of giving. Some of the biggest names in entertainment, make sure they participate in programmes that support deserving causes, be it AIDS or female infanticide. The message their involvement sends out is powerful enough to motivate thousands of others globally to engage in similar movements that eventually lead to permanent change and personal transformations.

Even if you don't have the time to participate in such organizations, why not start in your own backyard? How about spending half an hour teaching an underprivileged child in your locality? Spreading literacy and empowering even a single person, will make a huge difference, as anybody who has done so, will tell you. The day that same child comes to meet you armed with a college degree, may turn out to be one of the most memorable days of your life.

- 25. Just Do It:** Impossible is nothing. Strange, how the tag line of a world famous brand has the power to push individuals into new directions. Whether or not Nike sold more trainers with the 'Just Do It,' ad campaign is irrelevant. But so many years after it was launched, I still quote it to people who dither over decisions. There is

something so compelling about the essential message - an inbuilt urgency that demands instant action.

No matter how big or small the issue, the idea is to handle it well. To optimize; to do it with all your heart. Whenever I find myself feeling demotivated, I recall the slogan and get to the task with fresh enthusiasm. It helps that I love what I do. And that's the other thing - if you don't actively love your vocation, you'll remain resentful and miserable, crippled by self-doubt and waiting to opt out. So, make sure you identify that which you enjoy more than anything else - and success is bound to follow.

**26. Embrace Life:** As the cliché goes, life is way too short to begin with. Why fight when you can love? When you embrace life unconditionally, you value each and every moment. And when each moment becomes precious enough, you derive the maximum enjoyment out of it. In that beautiful moment, you discover God. And goodness ... love and laughter. Peace and beauty. Finding God has been our quest since time immemorial. We foolishly look for him in the most obvious of places - temples, churches, mosques and synagogues. On mountain tops and in the sky. When in reality, we should be looking no further than within our own hearts. God is an emotion. Life is God. Cherish life and you will find God. When you find God, happiness will find you!

Happiness happens to those who seek it.



# Shobhaa Dé shares her passionate concerns...



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