

# *Uncertain* **LIAISONS**

Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India



*Edited by*  
**KHUSHWANT SINGH & SHOBHA DÉ**

## **What do men and women in India's cities really think about sex?**

- Do they think it's dirty?
- Are they open about their sexual needs and desires?
- What are their sexual fantasies?
- What do they think of extra-marital sex and sexual experimentation?
- How do they rate their sexual partners?
- Are they promiscuous—in thought and in deed?
- Is there any love in their love-making?
- Are they aware of sexually transmitted diseases—and do they practice safe sex?

To answer these and related questions, the editors conducted independent research on the subject and asked each of the ten contributors to write on a separate area of urban Indian sexuality. The result of their research and analysis is a refreshingly honest view of the new sexual mores of urban Indian society. The essays are candid, provocative and sometimes scandalously funny; they explode myths about what men and women want from each other, provide a unique perspective on how sex is used in the media, comment on issues like divorce (non-existent in India five decades ago) and include sensitive, personal accounts of the experience of being a single adult in a marriage-oriented milieu.

Edited by Khushwant Singh and Shobha De  
*Uncertain Liaisons* is the first wide-ranging attempt to explore the changing attitudes towards sex and togetherness in urban India today.

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# Uncertain Liaisons





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Edited by  
Khushwant Singh  
&  
Shobha Dé



## VIKING

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Uncertain  
Liaisons



## Preface

THE *RAISON D'ÊTRE* FOR THIS BOOK WAS OBVIOUS—IT WAS overdue. Many years ago, a businessman confided in me, ‘These days it’s far more difficult to find a good servant than a well-trained wife . . . and frankly, I’d settle for the former any day.’ He looked genuinely distressed. I was naïve enough to feel alarmed by such a remark way back then. Before I could get all huffy and puffy, his wife nudged me and whispered, ‘Forget it . . . ignore him . . . my husband is stupid enough and drunk enough to be honest . . . but basically all Indian men feel that way.’ I asked her why she didn’t rebel against being compared to an efficient domestic servant or appliance. She shrugged noncommittally.

This was twenty years ago. But even today, a wife’s status is little more than that of a servant in most Indian homes. A servant without salary or sick leave at that. But whereas a disobedient domestic can be fired and a dissatisfied one can walk out of a job and seek fresh employment, a wife is really and truly stuck in a ‘like it or lump it’ situation. Plus, she is often forced to sleep with the boss.

It’s still *de rigueur* for well brought up women to pretend they detest whatever distasteful act it is they are compelled to

perform nightly in bed. It is still expected of a wife to lead a chaste life. It is still important for a bride to prove her virginity. And it is still accepted that men will be men and stray now and then. So what are the real attitudinal changes we are talking about? The Indian male's attitude to women can perhaps be summed up in the words of a movie gangster who exclaims exasperatedly: 'Women! Forget them. Problem is, if you don't want to live with a woman you can't even kill her.'

Sex remains a subject that is taboo. Sex is equated with prurience. Sex is dirty. Sex is forbidden. Sex is an evil activity indulged in by nasty people. It's difficult to get anybody to talk on the subject or discuss it honestly and openly. It's next to impossible to peel away the layers and years of hypocrisy and conditioning surrounding sex. Occasionally, one strikes pay dirt. Like the time a prominent editor of a regional magazine, when asked to identify the one aspect of his life he'd like to see changed, replied disarmingly, 'My only regret is that I have not had sexual relations with any woman other than my wife.'

A successful actor once told me, 'I am not a lech, really. It's just that when I meet an attractive woman my sexual curiosity is instantly aroused. I desperately want to go to bed with her just to find out what the experience is like. Any man who denies similar feelings is a liar.'

It was from such an ethos—of mixed signals and undisguised confusion—that the need for putting this book together arose. Had urban Indian attitudes towards sex really undergone a sea change? Or did sex remain largely in the head? Did men enjoy it—need it—more than women? Or was today's woman demanding and getting it on her own exacting terms? Was the 'O' word (orgasm) linked with the 'D' word (disappointment in this instance, not divorce)? Did divorce still spell death for the Indian woman? How different was a contemporary teenager's attitude to sex from that of his parents? Were our films actively encouraging promiscuity and perverting youth? It was time to find out.

We decided to invite opinions in the form of essays from people acknowledged as experts and leaders in their chosen fields. Our eclectic list of contributors was easily arrived at: we tapped the best. Each essayist is considered an expert in his or her field of activity. Our brief was simple—make it a personal statement, not an academic, soulless discourse. And ensure that it's reader-friendly.

The first piece submitted was written by our youngest writer, Puru Das, who at eighteen approached his topic with the freshness it warranted. Adolescent sex found a sensitive voice, and Das, a distinct identity of his own. Being the son of a published author and management guru, Gurcharan Das, it was important for Puru to establish his individuality—he has succeeded in doing so admirably.

Indira Jaising has long been considered the champion of women's causes in legal circles. For over two decades she has fought for the marital rights of her female clients, and helped countless victims of abuse live a more dignified life. She writes on divorce and the Indian woman in our troubled contemporary times with the same fire and commitment she brings into the courtroom.

M. F. Husain is the country's premier painter—a man who is known for his lifelong, passionate affair with art. Through his 'statement' he has graphically conveyed just how sensuous the physical act of putting brush to canvas really is.

Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen is one of the brightest literary stars of the subcontinent with two successful novels to her credit. She has put the average Indian marriage under a microscope and examined its subtext with a rare sensitivity.

Frank Simoes is a legendary adman whose contributions to finely-textured, beautifully conceptualized campaigns have made him a cult figure in his profession. He writes about the coming of age of sex in the nascent world of Indian advertising with wit, panache and remarkable insight.

Dr Prakash Kothari is India's foremost sexologist who has innumerable firsts to his credit. A widely travelled internationalist, he has done much to liberate the suppressed Indian libido through widely-read columns and articles. He discusses the most commonly experienced sexual problems in his extremely informative essay.

Film maker Mahesh Bhatt was seen as a brilliant brat director till he grew up and established his own genre with a string of stylish, off-beat bold films that were as much about his own life as life around him. His essay deals with the depiction of sex in Indian cinema, a subject as cloaked in ambiguity today as it was fifty years ago.

There is nothing ambiguous about Ashok Row Kavi's searingly honest piece about what it means to be a single gay male in India today. As an activist who came out fearlessly more than ten years ago, Ashok is in a unique position to monitor attitudinal changes towards this particular minority group. He does so with brutal candour.

Rinki Bhattacharya grew up in a traditional extended family, married the man she fell in love with . . . only to confront a painful divorce several years later. She writes feelingly about the situation of women trapped in similar swamps of marital disillusionment. As a writer and documentary film maker of repute, plus as someone deeply involved in women's issues, her views on the subject are specially relevant.

Dr Mulk Raj Anand is a doyen among littérateurs—a man well ahead of his times. As an author of several accomplished novels, the much-translated, much-quoted *Coolie* amongst them. 'Uncle Mulk', as he's affectionately called, has chosen to present his views via a short story that celebrates love and sex in one classical context. Admirers will definitely discern contemporary echoes in this, his lyrical, deceptively simple fable that mourns the passing of innocence.

*Uncertain Liaisons* really wrote itself and turned out to be as much of a revelation to its editors, namely, Khushwant Singh and myself, as we hope it will be to you, the reader.

*18 May 1993  
Bombay*

*Shobha Dé*



Introduction:  
Sex  
As  
Sedative

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Shobha Dé



## Sex As Sedative



THIS HASN'T BEEN EASY. HOW DO you get people to talk about sex? SEX. The word itself has such terrifying and terrible connotations. It seems to frighten everyone (and I include myself). When I was growing up sex was an unmentionable word in the family. It still is. Even as an adult woman, I hesitate to use it in the presence of my parents, no matter

how innocuous the context. Somewhere at the back of my mind, a little voice asks, 'Can the context ever be innocuous when it involves sex?' Frankly, it cannot. I remember one of my sisters (a surgeon, yet) actually resorting to the rather silly 'p' language whenever the word cropped up. She'd look over her shoulder to make sure Mother wasn't listening before lapsing into an old schoolgirl habit—secret codes. Sex became 'se-pex'. In some ways I still regard it as just that--'se-pex'. Such are the strong feelings of guilt and shame it continues to arouse. So how did I get people to talk on the forbidden subject? I started with women friends. But even that was tough. I felt

self-conscious. They got evasive. Sex is, after all, such an intensely personal matter. I began to see myself as Anaïs Nin's 'Spy in the House of Love'. But I was sure I'd be labelled an 'Interloper in the Bedroom of Stress'. I needed a breakthrough, just one, to get my teeth into the essay. And I was fortunate enough to find it (rather, her) fairly early in the game.

She walked into my parlour with full preparedness. I'd told her over the phone that I needed intimate information. Was she willing to share it? She was. The first few minutes were tense, not for her, but me. I discussed fashion, kids, my other writings, her work, travels, family problems—just about everything else. It was getting increasingly impossible to bring up the subject we'd agreed to meet for. I was ready to abandon it altogether till she looked pointedly at her watch and asked, 'Isn't it time we discussed sex?' Hurrah! I'd done it.

After that first interview, things got a lot easier, but it still wasn't a cakewalk. The problem had very little to do with the women I interviewed as they were more than forthcoming after the initial hesitant moments. The stumbling block was me. In fact, I was surprised by my own almost prudish reactions to the unstoppable flood of emotions and memories that even the simplest question seemed to unleash. Each voice became a revelation in more ways than one. Most of the stories were sad, cynical but entirely valid. A lot had nothing to do with the article. It was as if the essay had become a catalyst releasing a torrent of repressed recollections . . . hurt, real or imagined . . . and rage. So much rage.

I was finding it difficult to cope. Maybe, I was afraid to confront my own sexuality. Maybe I was struggling to keep a gender-bias out of the piece. Stay 'objective'. I soon gave up. The 'voices' of these women taught me many things—about myself and them. But my task still remained incomplete . . . I had to include the views of men as well. That was a lot tougher. It had to do with years and layers of conditioning. I

couldn't get myself to assume a soignée facade and pretend it was no big deal discussing boudoir secrets and strategies with someone from the opposite sex (the enemy!). When it actually came down to *it*, I shrank from the situation. And for perfectly predictable, disgustingly conventional and positively old-fashioned reasons: what would the men think of me? What would I have thought of some strange woman asking my husband such questions? I admit I flunked on this one. Most of the male opinions you'll read in this piece belong to obliging spouses or boyfriends of accommodating girlfriends, who were kind enough to grill their mates on my behalf.

For at least a few of the female interviewees these sessions were cathartic once they got started. What surprised me initially was the vehemence of their feelings. Fairly bland questions opened up floodgates of pain—physical and emotional. And the overwhelming reaction was of bitterness and hurt. Often, women broke down and wept as they recounted being subjected to years of humiliating, self-defeating sex. As one of them put it so graphically, 'Once a week, I hitch up my sari, close my eyes, open my legs and wait for my husband to use my body. My only consolation at that moment is that at least after those awful twenty minutes, he'll leave me alone for the next six days.'

Is sex for urban Indian women really so bad? So depressing? So demeaning? Alas, the answer is an unequivocal 'yes'.

And for the men?

Let me reproduce a representative quote: 'It's very easy for women to bitch about us. But what about them? Do they make even the slightest effort to make sex more enjoyable? NO. They just lie there like corpses and expect us to do all the work. Well . . . forget it. If that's the attitude, I'd rather remain celibate. Or resort to what they call "functional, programmed sex".'

Defiance ran into indifference several times as disgruntled wives compared themselves to ‘stiff drinks’ or ‘sedatives’, insisting that their chief and precise function in the marital bed was to ensure a good night’s sleep for their husbands. As one of them whined, ‘All he is interested in is keeping up his average. He actually asks, “So how many times did we do it this week?” He uses me like a pillow to get a comfortable night’s rest.’

There is a flip side to the story which is equally sad. ‘My wife treats sex as a weapon,’ a husband confessed at a noisy party. ‘We play these horrible reward-and-punishment games. If she’s holding a grudge over a trivial domestic matter by day, she waits till we get into bed at night, and that’s when she takes her revenge. It’s enough to put any man off sex for good. I’m getting to that stage rapidly.’

It was mostly discouraging, depressing stuff I encountered during this odyssey. Sex really was pretty terrible for all the stressed-out city folk tossing and turning frustratedly in unfriendly beds across the country.

Mercifully there were a few exceptions.

A young bride gushed, ‘We are very adventurous compared to our parents. For example, we kiss a lot, talk a lot, laugh a lot and actually bother to take off our clothes when we make love. My mother was surprised . . . even shocked to hear this. She told me they (my parents) never kissed, talked, laughed or undressed.’

To what did she attribute the shift in attitudes?

‘We respect each other’s feelings. We are more sensitive towards our partners’ needs.’

Did she work? Would she describe herself as a career woman?

‘Definitely.’ was the swift and proud response.

A psychotherapist pointed out that the urban working woman had changed an entire generation’s outlook towards

sex. ‘She has taken the lead in this matter,’ he commented. ‘She is definitely more confident, more assertive and more demanding. Besides—she can afford to be all that. No man can take her for granted. She expects and gets sex on her terms now.’ To which, a mid-thirties careerist responded, ‘Sex is about pleasure, not power. But yes, I’m through with men who say things like. “I’m giving it to you . . . aren’t you lucky?” I’m also through with men who label independent-minded women “nymphos” just because they (the women) are unwilling to play the old subjugated roles. To me, sex is something special, something beautiful, something shared. If a man doesn’t feel the same way about it, I don’t have the time for him.’

Are men uncomfortable with women who have broken through the stereotype? Largely. They are confused too. ‘We get all these crazy, mixed signals,’ said a yuppie lawyer in his late twenties. ‘Women these days want too much. Pre-sex tenderness, post-sex tenderness, during-sex tenderness—the works. Heck! We don’t have the time or energy for it. Besides, all these macho females are now into role reversal. And they expect us to crawl to them begging for sex. No way. I don’t believe in cheap trade-offs. It’s strictly take it or leave it for me.’

A bright and beautiful painter laughed, ‘Why are these guys so defensive? So threatened? Why are they making out like the modern woman is some wild voracious creature with raging hormones on a wild sexual rampage? Really! Men are so insecure these days it isn’t funny. It’s not as if we’re going to chew their balls off or something.’

, No, it isn’t funny at all. Women in the workplace have changed all the old equations and rewritten most of the rules. Women executives have more mobility, more money and, apparently, more fun. As one of them remarked, ‘We are standing the old standards on their heads. Casual sex is no longer a male prerogative. If I want it, I get it. It’s that simple.

And I certainly don't see myself as a woman on the make.'

The break up of the traditional joint family structure has contributed substantially to the revolution. There are no eagle-eyed mothers-in-law lurking around monitoring every sexual move made by the daughter-in-law. Consequently, age-old restrictions have been removed during the last decade and, with no "adult supervision" to hammer them, women feel freer to get out of their homes on their own. 'There are endless opportunities these days,' says a sixtyish housewife disapprovingly. 'Wives aren't answerable to anybody—not even to their husbands. That is why society has become so promiscuous.' Her daughter-in-law adds, 'Promiscuous implies a value judgement. Who is to say what is moral or immoral? In my mother-in-law's time, illicit liaisons were kept within the joint family—brothers-in-law, even fathers-in-law, took advantage of the set-up. Today this isn't so. My mother-in-law has told me herself that she suffered daily rape in her marriage. I think that's pathetic. My contemporaries would never put up with such indignities. We'd prefer to walk out of such a demeaning marriage. I'd opt for divorce.'

The D-word cropped up as frequently as the F-word and neither was considered dirty any more. With divorce rates on the rise there is an increasing number of single women in their thirties and forties looking for relationships, without strings attached. These aren't easy to come by in the natural course of things so they inevitably end in affairs with married men—generally office colleagues. Sex, in this case, is reduced to messy, murky, secretive activity indulged in clandestinely. And though the stigma of divorce is slowly fading, a divorced woman is still perceived as a threat, mainly by other women. The ones who spoke to me for this essay ruefully admitted that they'd been knocked off the party circuit the day they attained single status; but they aren't staying home weeping into their pillows night after night either. 'There are ways to beat the

system,' crowed an attractive model co-ordinator. 'It doesn't pay to stay home licking old wounds. If a girlfriend feels insecure having me around, I drop her and move on to another social set. See, that's the advantage—I now have the option to pick and choose my bed companions.'

Middle class attitudes to sex had certainly undergone a sea change, if the following example is any indication. The first time I heard the desperation in the anonymous caller's voice I disconnected impatiently, revolted by the suggestive words. The calls kept coming. After about a month, the man got to the point. 'Madame, I need your help. My wife and I would like the address of a swapping club, a key club, a place where we can exchange partners.' He followed that up with a letter enclosing a self-addressed envelope. I stared curiously at it—Bhandup. This can't be for real, I said to myself. Bhandup! That's a nondescript, busy, working class, satellite suburb of Bombay. The man's letter was semi-literate, but his keenness to experiment sexually, a hundred per cent genuine. He assured me his wife was equally interested in swinging. Suburban sex had obviously gone through the roof when no one was looking.

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For every upbeat story there is a downbeat tale. The most amusing and insightful retelling of a marital incident came from a group of happily boozed up women at a girlie lunch. Said one, 'When I notice my husband in an amorous mood after dinner, I quickly switch off my bedside lamp and pretend to be fast asleep when he comes back from brushing his teeth.' Another woman guffawed, 'You only pretend to be asleep—I feign death.' Five tequilas later everybody agreed sex was far too overrated to waste more time on. 'Let's discuss important things,' suggested the first woman. 'Like?' chorussed the rest. 'Like . . . who's sleeping with whom,' she sniggered. There

you are—this little vignette can either be dismissed as socialite fluff or it can be viewed as a slice of city life, funny and depressing at the same time. ‘There’s just no spark left in sex after marriage,’ the group concluded redundantly. No spark! Just cinders.

So began the process of sorting out quotes, sifting through notes and reaching a few tentative conclusions. I am afraid the Indian male didn’t exactly glow in the portrait painted by the women I met and interviewed. I drew up a list of the likes, dislikes, preferences, prejudices, taboos, fears, hang-ups and bugbears that were thrown up during our exchanges. This was originally meant to help me focus on the subject of my essay but I’m reproducing it for your easy reference and a few laughs—of recognition, scorn, sympathy and, perhaps, pity even.

Here goes :

- Indian men suffer from an incurable breast fixation—the bigger the mammaries the better their fantasies. No other erotic zone seems to exist.
- A sexy woman is a buxom woman. Note the typical Hindi film heroine defined by her ‘thunder thighs’ and heavily padded bras.
- Foreplay begins and ends at the nipples.
- Kissing on the mouth isn’t a preference—and most women are relieved (‘who needs after-dinner curry breaths?’)
- Nudity during love-making is optional and not mandatory.
- Sexy talk is rarely used during sex.
- Most men give the impression they’re scared of what Mama will think even when they’re in bed with their wives.
- They’re surprisingly ignorant about bodily

functions, even basic anatomy.

- They seem repelled by the woman's sex organ.
- They are high on ego. Low on performance.
- Oral sex is a one-way street—women oblige, men don't.
- Men rarely notice or care whether their partners have enjoyed an orgasm.

There you have it.

A pretty discouraging picture. Maybe an exaggerated one.

My final question to the obliging interviewees was: 'How do you rate your bedmate on a scale of 1 to 10?' The answers had averaged out at around 4.5. A dismal score. Below pass-marks without a doubt. The conclusion was obvious: Indian men make lousy lovers. But the babies keep coming.



Sex  
in the  
Time  
of  
Stress

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Shobha Dé



## Sex in the Time of Stress



MOST WOMEN I KNOW HATE THEIR mates. Wait a minute. Let me be more specific—most *married* women I know hate their husbands—the men they are stuck with for better or for worse. Most of these ladies have not known any other man—sexually or otherwise. Most believe all men are the same. A lot of them say they would have preferred to remain

single. Or want another chance at a more fulfilling relationship. The tragedy is that their men are not even aware of the depth of their rage and frustration. These women don't speak to their partners. No questions are asked. No answers given. The marital bed is a cold battlefield with two unhappy people lying stiffly side by side, year after year, dreaming different dreams and yearning for a closeness, comfort and satisfaction that eludes them completely. 'There is no love in our love-making,' complains Divya, an attractive woman in her mid-thirties.

'We indulge in need-based sex,' says Rani, a marketing executive with a heavy travel itinerary.

'He uses me like he has a right of passage,' confesses Soha, a tired housewife. 'Marriage is nothing more than legitimate whoring,' announces Piya, a newly-married girl checking the glittering diamonds in her ring. 'It's either a stiff shot of whisky . . . or me. He needs one or the other for a good night's sleep,' complains Hasina, a secretary in a garment factory.

'What is it about Indian men that seems to alienate their women so much?' I asked a twice-divorced designer friend, proud of her considerable experience with lovers from all backgrounds and nationalities. 'They lack bed etiquette,' she elaborated. 'Most of them indulge in crude coupling without any finesse.' When pressed further, she went into explicit and intimate details from her many encounters. 'I always get the feeling Indian men are basically terrified of a woman's sexuality. If a woman expresses her needs, she is promptly labelled a nymphomaniac. They expect her to be a passive, obliging receptacle for their semen as and when they feel the urge to discharge in her body.' That ugly word 'use' cropped up over and over again in my several conversations. And invariably the first reaction expressed by the women I talked to was one of anger. Followed by disgust. 'I'm amazed at how ignorant my husband is even about basics,' said Laila, a boutique owner, 'he still doesn't know my body well enough to realize what pleases me and frankly, I don't think he cares either. It is what pleases HIM that matters.'

Another woman, single and in her mid-thirties, stated, 'The whole thing boils down to the male ego. Indian men make the world's lousiest lovers because they are unable to see beyond themselves. And for that I have to blame their mothers. That's where it all starts. What we get when they finally come crawling into our beds are pampered, spoilt brats who expect us to indulge them while they give nothing in return.' The Indian mother put in frequent appearances during my candid

interviews. If one is to go by these chats, she emerges as the main dampener of any show of sexual enthusiasm—an all-pervasive presence, peering over the bedpost while her son asserts his conjugal rights at a frequency dictated by him. Purna, a graphic artist, put it very well when she said, ‘I always get the impression when my husband is making love to me that his mind is on what Mummyji will think of him and his performance.’

Mummyji comes into the picture at a very early stage in a man’s life, as some male interviewees admitted reluctantly. ‘Our whole attitude to sex was coloured by our mother.’ No, these boy-men never discussed the taboo subject with Mom but Mama’s views on it are clear enough—bad girls do it for pleasure. Good girls endure it as a duty. ‘The guilt associated with “the act” is unendurable,’ said Suresh, a man in his mid-forties. ‘We grew up in an atmosphere of utter repression. I was scared of my own sexuality as an adolescent. I didn’t know what was happening to me at night, as I lay in bed experiencing the most delicious sensations but feeling terrible about them later.’

An advertising agency head revealed, ‘Don’t laugh—but I was a virgin when I married. I nearly died of shock when I discovered my wife wasn’t one. It took me a long time to come to terms with this and for nearly two years of our married life I would experience a sense of revulsion at the thought that my wife had “betrayed” me by sleeping with someone else earlier.’

Another corporate chief admitted, ‘Our society still places a great deal of emphasis on virginity and chastity. There’s nothing wrong with this. I’ve told my own daughters that they have to stay pure for their husbands.’ What about his sons? The man dismissed the question with a laugh. ‘Boys will be boys. I don’t expect my sons to be duds in this department. They’ve definitely been around. In fact, I tease them about their prowess . . .’

Did his wife go along with this attitude?

Amazingly enough, she did. ‘Let the mothers of those girls look out for them. My boys are normal. They like having fun.’

What about husbands who stray?

Leena, a banker, shrugged, ‘Look . . . I was brought up in a very conservative atmosphere. Sex has never been a priority for me. I had my children early and called it a day. What my husband does for recreation is his business so long as he stays off my back and doesn’t make any demands on me.’

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Demands. It was a word that came up frequently. Where the older generation was concerned, it was the women who spat it out bitterly, but with today’s crowd, many men expressed their anxiety over the changed power equation. For, the new Indian woman is a strange character. But the new Indian man is even stranger. The poor fellow doesn’t quite know what’s hit him—a ballistic missile or a (sex) bomb. So he stands there bewildered and zapped. No wiser than his father or grandfather before him. Like the twenty-four-year-old US educated engineer who said, ‘I was totally zapped by the new breed of Indian girl. Her expectations were pretty high and there was such an emphasis on performance. It was hard to keep up with her demands . . .’ His words were echoed by a thirty-something Delhi engineer who claimed he was so ‘disoriented’ by the women he met at the workplace that he’d withdrawn socially. ‘I find it impossible to relax . . . to cope . . . these women can eat up a man. Nothing seems to satisfy them. I think they watch too many American films and expect us to compete with those super-stud heroes.’ Another one added, ‘I feel like a sacrificial lamb at the altar of sex.’

The girls I spoke to laughed at this charge, ‘Most Indian

men are high on ego and low on performance,' they insisted. 'Why do they behave like they're doing women a favour by bedding them? If that's their attitude, why can't we demand our sexual rights too?'

A telephone operator called Shalan offered an explanation: 'Men are obsessed with their performance because they are obsessed with their genitals—size, shape and colour. Women, on the other hand, can't see their own genitals which are hidden from view. That's why breasts become their priority in much the same way—size, shape and colour. Since the vagina is like a dark, hidden cave that doesn't give the game or its secrets away—a woman can fake pleasure whereas a man can't. She can simulate orgasm while feeling nothing at all. For married women especially, pretence pays—it's the key to happiness on the marital bed.'

A soft-spoken bank executive wondered aloud, 'Sex is supposed to be a mutually shared experience. But our men are so full of themselves they rarely consider our feelings. What takes place in most marriages is functional sex devoid of any real enjoyment—at least for the woman.'

This feeling of being short-changed was echoed over and over again by the women I spoke to. While some stuck to generalities ('He's insensitive . . . selfish.') others got into specifics. Asked to specify poor bed manners, most women mentioned indifferent personal hygiene as the biggest turn-off. 'Men don't wash before making love . . . and rarely after,' said an airline stewardess. 'I'm fastidious about clean habits, but most of the men I've known don't attach as much importance to them. For instance, they come to bed without brushing their teeth or showering.' An over-worked wife complained, 'After I get back from work, I have a quick bath. But not my husband. It's awful making love to a sweaty, smelly man reeking of his office—trapped cigarette smoke and stale perspiration.' Others mentioned the rather odious habit Indian men have of breaking

wind in bed. ‘How can you possibly feel romantic when the air is foul? I feel like holding my nose, but I know how insulted my husband would feel . . .’ After-dinner belches are another major grouse. Said a newly-wed, ‘I take a lot of trouble to cook dinner. It makes me happy that my husband enjoys it. But when he burps into my face in bed later, I feel sick.’

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In a city like Bombay, stress seems the biggest libido-killer. ‘Forget it,’ dismissed a business journalist, ‘by the time the two of us get home, we are too tired to do anything but grab a few hours of sleep.’ Meera, her colleague at the paper, talked about another common problem—men who bring business to bed. ‘My husband is a driven man,’ she said, ‘I like him to be ambitious . . . but it’s really a bit much when he starts narrating complicated business deals while he is heaving and grunting over me.’ What does she do then? ‘I switch off and plan my next day’s schedule.’ Some well-trained couples do try and inject a dose of romanticism into their love-making, but most complain of boredom. ‘We’ve tried everything—showering together, doing it in the swimming-pool, trying new tricks like pouring wine on each other’s bodies . . . but somehow it seems fake. Just because that’s the way they do it abroad—or claim to—doesn’t mean it can work here. After a point, it seems absurd.’

The easy availability of soft and hard porn seems to have unleashed a storm amongst the middle classes—those who didn’t have access to electronic erotica earlier. Watching tanned prime bodies indulging in sensual calisthenics to the seductive beat of rock music has revolutionized their way of looking at their own hitherto drab couplings. Said Mr and Mrs Gupte from suburban Bombay enthusiastically. ‘We didn’t know that such things went on in the world. We have learnt so much watching blue films on video . . . and frankly it

has changed our attitude to each other.' Expanding on that Mrs Gupte mentioned, 'Previously, my husband never used to undress me. In fact, neither of us removed our clothes. These days undressing each other has become an important part of our love-making.'

Similarly, Sanjay and Niharika, employees in a nationalized bank mentioned, 'We watch these films with our friends. It's relaxing and stimulating. Earlier we used to feel guilty and ashamed performing what are considered "unconventional" acts. Now we know it's perfectly normal and very enjoyable to have oral sex.'

'Guilt' is the operative word. 'It's our upbringing and conditioning,' admits Vikas, a freelance commercial artist. 'I was brought up to believe sex was filthy and dirty. I used to think masturbation would eventually kill me . . . that I'd get some disease.' Tehzeeb, a housewife, agreed, 'Sex was such a taboo subject during my growing years. We never discussed it at home. My mother would've been shocked if I'd asked her even the most basic questions. I found out about the facts of life on my wedding night—Oh! and it was horribly embarrassing. I thought my husband was some kind of a pervert for standing naked in front of me.' Had she made an effort to ensure her teenage daughters do not go into marriage suffering her fate? Tehzeeb hesitated. 'I can't get myself to bring up the topic with them. But I get the feeling they are very aware. Most schools today conduct counselling classes where sex is discussed openly. No . . . my girls won't go into marriage not knowing about the birds and bees.'

Perhaps not, but urban teenagers continue to battle with problems of coming to terms with their sexuality in much the same way as their parents did. The communication gap remains unbridged, as adolescents struggle to find acceptable outlets for their burgeoning urges while parents frown disapprovingly in the background. Says seventeen-year-old Abhay, 'My

parents would freak out if they knew I was no longer a virgin. But that reaction wouldn't be half as bad as if they found out my twenty-year-old sister was pretty experienced too.' Sangita, his sister, concurs, 'It's too bad we can't be more open with our folks. They are scared nobody will marry me if I'm de-flowered. To an extent they are right. My chances in an arranged marriage would definitely be affected. But I'm not planning to go in for an arranged marriage—I've already found my future husband. I'll marry for love.'

Surprisingly, young men displayed distinct double standards when it came to marriage. As twenty-eight-year-old Mohit put it, 'I'm still old-fashioned enough to want to marry a virgin. But that doesn't mean I won't have my fun before settling down. Take my word for it—the girls I bed will not be the girls I think of marrying.'

On the other hand, educated working girls seem more open and willing to experiment. Sapna, an attractive marketing executive in her mid-twenties, spoke for her group when she stated, 'It's pretty cool to be experienced. And it's pretty cool to take the initiative. If I fancy someone, I make it clear. I'm willing to go to bed with absolutely no strings attached. If it works out on a regular basis—fine. If it stays as a one night stand—that's fine too.'

When I mentioned this to women of my mother's generation, they were shocked beyond belief and blamed it on television—specifically, the onslaught of foreign (read: Westernized) programmes beamed via satellite TV. An elderly lady with five young granddaughters lamented the new permissiveness and condemned it strongly, 'When I got married, the only men I had spoken to were blood relatives. My husband was a complete stranger I'd glimpsed through lowered eyes. And yet . . . our marriage succeeded.' But did she enjoy sex? It was a tough question to ask and I was sure she'd throw me out of her neat, well-appointed suburban home

when I raised it. Surprisingly, she didn't. Instead, she took her time before answering. 'What is enjoyment? Are today's girls enjoying themselves? I don't think so. They are merely copying what they see in films and read in books. For us, the man-woman relationship was a sacred one. And a permanent one. We did not behave like hungry animals.' Did she think it was wrong for women to express their sexual needs? Thoughtfully, she said, 'I'm puzzled by all this. Women are created to bear children. It is men who have urges that need satisfying. I had never seen a man without clothes till I married. And it shocked me . . . scared me when I saw my husband undressing but only in the beginning. Women get used to it . . . women can get used to anything. That is their power and strength.' She still hadn't answered my question—did she enjoy sex? With a sly smile she replied, 'Let us say I did not dislike it after some time.'

I spoke to her granddaughter, a sprightly college student named Preeti. 'I don't know about others my age, but I'm still uptight about sex. I believe in arranged marriages and I'd like to remain a virgin till my wedding night.' Is that unusual? Do her friends disagree? How did Preeti find out about sex? 'I went to a co-ed school. I grew up in a joint family with several cousins, we used to peep through keyholes and watch our parents. The older cousins would tell us what was going on. Gradually, we started experimenting a little amongst ourselves. But we never went too far.' What was too far? 'It was understood that we'd keep our clothes on and that we wouldn't actually have intercourse. It stayed at touching and fondling, very innocent stuff.' Did she discuss sex with her peer group at college? 'With girlfriends—yes. The boys make it sound stupid and cheap. Besides, they get their kicks watching blue films . . . the girls hate them . . . feel repulsed.' Did her parents know about her activities outside the college campus? 'Very little. They trust me. I have had two boyfriends, but we haven't gone beyond kissing.'

I discussed the subject with her mother, a woman in her early forties, separately. ‘My husband and I had a “love marriage”,’ she said, ‘but both of us were sexually inexperienced. I started enjoying sex only after ten years of marriage. By then we’d both lost our inhibitions and were relaxed enough with each other to talk frankly about things—for instance, I hate having sex when I’m menstruating. My husband enjoys it. Earlier, I used to tolerate it, now I put my foot down.’

Her husband, an athletic looking executive in a multi-national company who plays tennis thrice a week, was more reserved on the subject, ‘We come from traditional backgrounds. We are conventional upper-middle class people. You can call us boring . . . conformist . . . but we cannot shake off our values . . . discard them like old clothes. But not all our friends agree . . .’ He mentioned ‘swinging parties’ where couples swapped partners and watched hard core films together. He discussed casual affairs at the office with secretaries and female colleagues. But the disapproval in his voice was evident enough. Had he ever strayed? He shook his head emphatically. But a few days later, he called to say he’d lied in his wife’s presence. ‘Look . . . I’m travelling twenty days of the month . . . there are opportunities galore, you know? Besides, women today have changed so much, I don’t even have to do the chasing. Whether it’s Bangalore, Delhi, Calcutta or Madras, I always score a hit, often getting picked up in the coffee shop while breakfasting.’

Picked up? ‘Yes, picked up,’ confirmed another frequent traveller, Patrick, a Bombay bachelor working in media. ‘Frankly, it puts me off. But these girls aren’t hookers. Most of them are hard-working careerists. They come on a bit too strong sometimes, but their argument is “Why ever not? Does the monopoly rest with men alone?”’ Do these casual encounters signify anything more? ‘Of course,’ insists Patrick.

'Just because women have more money to throw around, they feel a sense of power. I don't mind a woman picking up the tab in a restaurant. But I do mind her dragging me to bed against my will.' Does he feel the pressure to perform? 'No. I resist it. If the girl gets too aggressive, I tell her to get lost. I find such women a turn-off.'

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What do the girls have to say about the reversal of roles? Anita, a single mother working for a pharmaceutical firm, admits, 'It is definitely a new phenomenon,' adding cautiously, 'my friends and I go out in groups. If one of us fancies a guy, she makes it obvious, but nobody is forced into a situation he or she doesn't want.' Her friend Minnie agrees, 'We don't rape the men, for God's sake. It's just that we believe in real, not fake, equality. Besides, all of us live on our own. We have a place to go to on our terms. It's a great feeling to ask a man home and not have parents hanging around.' How does Anita, the single mother, handle this? 'My kid's just six years old. He sleeps in a separate room with an ayah. He is as used to seeing my male friends around as the girlfriends who spend occasional weekends. It's no big deal.' Do her parents know about her lifestyle? 'I'm totally independent of them: financially, mentally and emotionally. If they do know, they prefer not to talk about it. Besides, they don't live in the same town.'

But what of young people who still live in an extended family? 'It's hell. There's no privacy at all,' said Amit who got married two years ago. 'My wife and I don't get any time to ourselves even at night. Believe it or not but we have young nephews and nieces sleeping between us every day.' (They don't have children of their own yet). Why is that? 'The elders think it's a good way for my wife to get integrated into the

family and prepare herself for motherhood.' His wife, Lalita, shrugs philosophically, 'It's difficult. But we do manage to get away for weekends on our own.' Her husband perked up immediately, 'Two or three couples get together and go to a resort out of Bombay. That's when we really let our hair down.' What exactly does that entail? 'Our wives wear minis, swimsuits . . . smoke, drink and dance at the discos.' Obviously, it's something they cannot do under the disapproving eyes of their parents back home.

Resort sex seems to be catching on, going by the popularity of various getaways an hour or two from the city. 'Yes,' confirmed a manager, 'we get quite a crowd over weekends. Several couples . . . not all of them married, at least not to each other.' Dirty weekends? He laughs noncommittally. 'Nothing dirty, madam. We don't ask too many questions.'

"Illicit sex" has too many nasty connotations,' says a marriage counsellor. 'My clients are more liberal. Adultery is still a big issue, of course. But it doesn't destroy marriages as it once used to. People are more tolerant about casual affairs.' Even husbands of straying wives? 'Definitely,' he says. Sheetal, an attractive fortyish socialite echoes his words. 'My friends and I love our husbands. Our affairs have nothing to do with marriage. We believe our relationships are strong enough. In any case—if he can stray, so can we. That much is clearly understood. There are more important aspects to marriage. Children, financial security . . . it's unrealistic to expect two people to remain faithful in today's context. It's almost absurd. All of us like younger men. They are better lovers and much more attentive.' According to her the first ten years of her marriage were sexually unexciting. 'We call them "duty fucks" in our circle,' she giggled. 'Our husbands had their "fuck and chuck" girlfriends but we had nothing . . . no satisfaction, no stimulation. We lay back on the pillows while they pumped us. That was it. Things are different now. Our boyfriends have

made us aware of our bodies—taught us a trick or two. We make better love to our husbands. They're happy, we're happy.'

The husbands, on the other hand, don't seem to have read too many books on the 'new man'. They continue to function as their fathers and grandfathers did—in a daze, treating sex as a marital right to be exerted on an 'as is, where is' basis. Meera complains, 'My biggest competitor today is Star TV. My husband would rather watch *The Bold and The Beautiful* than pay attention to me.' But shouldn't at least some of the steamy passion projected on the small screen rub off on him? 'No,' she says emphatically, 'that is a "Western" concept according to him. He says men in India don't behave like that and I shouldn't expect him to either. If I ever point out a romantic situation on TV he mocks me by saying, "Why don't you divorce me and find an American?" We try and squeeze in time for love between his favourite programmes. Tell me . . . how can I feel turned on? He thinks it's as simple as pressing the buttons on his remote control.'

However, as we have seen earlier, watching freely available X-rated films on video seems to have influenced a small section of the hitherto puritanical middle class. As Sushma, a housewife, puts it, 'I never knew people did such things. The first time I watched a blue film was at a party. All the men were crowding in the bedroom after drinks. The women joined them one by one. At first, I felt most awkward. But when I saw how relaxed the others were, I too watched with interest. Now my husband and I get such films regularly. Formerly we used to think of anal sex as something filthy and perverted. Not any more. In fact, we both enjoy it.' Did they have sufficient privacy in their cramped suburban apartment to watch such films? 'We wait till the children go to sleep,' she said. Which is a departure from more affluent families where it is considered 'liberal' for teenagers to sit in and comment on the action.

Mrs B, a social worker from the upper crust, expressed her reservations. ‘I don’t approve of such nonsense. I know it’s harmful for my young son to have access to such films. I feel very ashamed of it, but my husband says it’s “manly” and all his friends also watch such films along with their boys. When we aren’t at home, my son watches the same films with his girlfriends. I can’t tell him anything under the circumstances.’

There seems to be a great deal of confusion *vis-à-vis* the correct attitude to adopt towards teenage children particularly daughters. As Mrs Shah lamented, ‘The girls are staying out later and later. Sometimes they insist on going to all-night parties. They tell me all their friends are allowed weekends with boyfriends. And it’s true. The argument is “Why pretend? Why be hypocritical? In any case if we want to sleep with each other, we can do it by bunking during college hours. Whatever is done in the dark can also happen by day.”’

Another divorced woman complained bitterly that she had no control over her two older children. ‘They tell me, “Mama, you lead your life—you have your men friends. What right have you to tell us not be with ours.” My daughter brings her boyfriend home and they go straight to the bedroom. I’ve told her not to lock the door, but she just laughs. My son too brings a succession of girls and they sit on his bed behind closed doors. If I say something he flares up. My children say I have a dirty mind. Maybe. But I did have to arrange an abortion for a young girl my son was dating recently. And it was a very traumatic experience for both of us.’

Did her son agree with the decision?

‘He was indifferent. He behaved as if he had nothing to do with the mess. He said, “It’s the chick’s problem. I’d told her to go on the pill.”’

Has she discussed contraception with her own daughter?

‘Yes. I did bring up the subject—she dismissed it saying, “All the guys protect themselves these days. We are the safe

sex generation." I also found a packet of condoms in her handbag. She wasn't at all embarrassed by the disclosure.'

Other parents aren't so open with their children. Most mothers shy away from bringing up the topic of sex. 'It's taboo,' said Sashi who works in an architect's office. 'My husband says that there is no need to place such emphasis on the subject. His argument is that our generation grew up without any parental counselling. "If it was OK for us, it's OK for them," he tells me.'

Does she echo his views?

'Not entirely. But frankly speaking, I do feel awkward discussing such a personal subject. Our background is conservative. I never leave my bedroom unless I'm properly dressed in a sari. My children don't go in and out of our room either. Nor do we go into theirs. Our friends talk about bathing with their kids and all that. I find it most shocking. The last time I saw my daughter naked was when she was eight or nine years old.'

Was she there when her child started to menstruate?

'Well . . . I was in the office. Kritika was twelve. She phoned me and she was crying. I could guess immediately. I rushed home. She was puzzled and scared. I explained everything to her then. But my own mother's reaction was very different. When I got my first period, she was furious with me . . . as if it was all my fault. I was made to feel guilty and dirty. And all these years later, I still feel a sense of shame each month.'

Is that how it is in her community?

'Mainly. But these days it has become a fashion to celebrate a girl reaching puberty. One grandmother I know sent sweets to her daughter-in-law when the grandchild started menstruating. It was treated as a festival with everybody saying "congratulations". The poor girl was so embarrassed.'

What about her equation with her husband.

'It's OK,' she said unenthusiastically. 'Lot of acting and pretence.'

Why so?

'I'm not really interested in sex. My husband wants it much more. I oblige because it is easier and quicker than fighting. Besides, if I don't give it to him, some other woman will. He can always pay for it—and I know he does when he goes abroad. He is fascinated by white skin. He always tells me I'm too dark for his taste.'

Is he light-skinned himself?

'Oh no! In fact, I get repulsed by his body. And his genitals. I find them so black and ugly.'

Then?

'Then nothing. When he travels to London, he goes to prostitutes. I know that for a fact. Besides, he doesn't bother to deny it.'

Doesn't she mind?

'I used to. Not now. These days I feel "let him go wherever he wants to with whoever he chooses, so long as he leaves me alone." All his friends also like European women. They say they've got such beautiful pink breasts and rosy nipples. They taunt us about our figures. "So fat—such flabby tummies. Stretch marks. Plump thighs. Dark brown nipples. Black pubic hair." Why don't they look at their own bodies in the mirror sometimes?'

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This fixation with fair skin came up frequently during interviews. The men were quite blatant about the prejudice. 'Our women fall hopelessly short in the body department,' stated Shabbir, a successful, well-travelled businessman. 'When we see those white girls in sexy clothes can you blame us for salivating? Why can't our wives be more fitness

conscious? How do they expect us to get inspired by chunky wooden blocks in our bed?’

The women responded with indignation, ‘They want us to look and behave like Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*. But show me one Michael Douglas in India and I’ll join a health club tomorrow,’ Nikita, a fashion co-ordinator, said spiritedly. ‘Our men have a real *phirang* complex,’ complained Maya, her friend and colleague. ‘Their tongues hang out at the sight of fair skin—and never mind what the woman looks like. It’s disgusting.’

A group of men disagreed vehemently. ‘Not so,’ insisted Suresh. ‘We also enjoy our visits to massage parlours in Bangkok. It has nothing to do with skin colour. Those women know how to preserve themselves. They have such supple bodies. And more importantly—no hang-ups. No *nakhras*. Our women don’t know the first thing about arousing their mates. They just lie there and expect us to do all the work. Well—forget it, baby. I’d rather head East and be pampered there.’ Another young man added, ‘We like our egos and our bodies to be simultaneously massaged. Those Bangkok babes are professionals. Experts. They know their job. Indian women today have become so demanding and critical, one feels turned off. They aren’t appreciative. They put us down constantly. Well . . . my attitude is to say “fuck off”. I can do better . . . with less effort at that.’

‘It isn’t that,’ a thoughtful Rekha adds. ‘We aren’t demanding unrealistic sexual prowess. We don’t want athletes in our beds. But surely a little foreplay isn’t asking for too much? Sexy conversation instead of a finger daubed with vaseline? I take a little time to feel aroused. But most men are so impatient. The underlying message seems to be “Let’s get this over and done with, I have more important things to do”.’

And what about life in the sex-track for the bold, the beautiful and the decadent? ‘It’s exciting but scary,’ says a former princess, now married to a wealthy merchant. ‘We live by international standards. Our friends belong to the European aristocracy. We are complete misfits here.’ Another fiftyish businesswoman scoffs. ‘Jet-set? Ridiculous. These people are pathetic. They try a bit too hard to keep up with the fast set abroad, but they lack the style to pull it off. Yes, they go to fancy clubs that offer kinky sex. Yes, they attend parties that can be described as orgies. And yes, they are heavily into wife-swapping, experimental sex, key clubs and that sort of thing. But back in India they behave like all the other hypocrites and pretend to be virtuous.’

Maria, a half-Indian, half-German wife of a prominent businessman mentioned ‘girlie sextours’. She described bi-annual trips taken by her and like-minded girlfriends to different beach resorts (Phuket used to be popular) in the Far East where she says they go unrecognized and can frequent bars and night clubs without fear of discovery. ‘It’s easy to pick up escorts. Toy-boys for those who like them able-bodied and young. Older men for those with more sophisticated tastes.’ She described side trips to gigolo joints, live shows, male striptease clubs and lesbian places. ‘We do it for kicks. Nothing serious. Five days of fun and then back to our boring Bombay lives.’

Boring? Anything but. One of the indulgent husbands laughed his wife’s weekend adventures off. ‘Look, in my father’s time, the men travelled frequently and alone. One of the main attractions used to be exotic sex. Today the women want the same options. These girls are good-looking, independent and rich in their own right. Why can’t they have some fun too? It’s fine by me—so long as my wife doesn’t pick up AIDS somewhere.’

The film industry lives by its own set of rules, though a veteran movie-star watcher, says things have changed there as well. 'Divorce . . . re-marriage used to be unthinkable in the past. Not any more. Affairs too are far more upfront. Women are taking the initiative much more. Young actresses no longer pretend to be vestal virgins. Open any film magazine and you can read their outspoken views on everything from virginity to homosexuality. All the old fears of discovery have disappeared.' A young woman (not a part of the film industry) narrated her experiences with a leading hero who picked her up along with an attractive girlfriend. 'He called us over to his house after a party. We knew the score. In the car, my friend asked me, "Shall we toss? Will you take him first or shall I?" He was too drunk to care. We all got into bed together after undressing. He caressed both of us equally. My friend climbed over him and they made love as I watched. It was exciting. I waited for my turn—but it never came. He fell asleep! Anyway, there were no hard feelings. We are still friends though we no longer sleep together. He is married now and I'm sure his wife knows.'

Another minor league actress talked about the efficient grapevine operating in the business. 'We girls have really grown up these days. If a guy gives great sex, we like to spread the word and share him. Last night I received a call from Delhi. My friend mentioned a newly-discovered stud. She told me, "You can have him, he's terrific in bed." This same woman runs an informal service which organizes pretty, obliging starlets to decorate parties with. But she insists she isn't a madam. 'I don't do it for money. This is just a friendly arrangement. The girls have a good time. Nobody forces them to do anything. If it clicks with a guy, that's great. No pressure.' Those on the fringes of the glamour business also get sucked into the promiscuous party scene. 'Models are in great demand,' said a hostess known for extravagant parties. 'I keep

at least two guest bedrooms free on my party days. Invitees are welcome to use them. We live in a pretty open society after all.'

Some of the models resent the reputation and claim that no such thing goes on. 'We are professionals doing our jobs. There might be some girls who are easy lays but that isn't the rule at all.' An adman comments laconically, 'It's difficult not to get ideas when a sexy woman in a sensational little dress that barely covers her bum comes on strong. Provocative dressing is invariably interpreted as a positive signal. If these girls want to hang on to pristine pure images they should dress more decorously.' The girls unanimously protest. Said Mrs T, 'That's crazy. We are free to wear what's in, what's hot. We like funky dressing. Even cross-dressing. But that's a fashion option—not an invitation to bed.'

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The two big buzz words of the Nineties namely, Safe Sex, have still to make enough of an impact in India. Safe sex is discussed all right—but practised? Doctors and social workers say the onus is still largely on the woman, and she too is not always in a position to enforce safe sex unless she takes the initiative and has herself fitted with an IUD or goes on the pill. Men continue to resist the condom claiming it affects their performance and pleasure.

Government agencies have stepped up their safe sex awareness programmes considerably, particularly over the electronic media. However, attitudinal changes have still to take place, particularly in the minds of clients who patronize prostitutes. Social workers despair over the fact that most males refuse to use condoms even when the same are offered by the prostitute—there is always another woman willing to accept an unprotected customer. This, despite the heavy

propaganda undertaken by several agencies with respect to AIDS prevention measures in the sprawl of urban red-light areas and industrial ghettos on the fringes of the cities.

The younger generation raised on a steady diet of MTV with its frequent AIDS messages are far more tuned in to the potential threat of unprotected sex. As a teenager put it, 'We prefer making out to making love—it's safer that way.'

Peer group discussions on the subject help to highlight its importance. Sex isn't something undertaken in a whimsical spirit any longer by a generation only too aware of the dangers involved. Consequently, spontaneous one-night stands have taken a beating—unless the couple is prepared (which most seem to be). Going by the number of condom ads in the glossies, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to state that protected or safe sex is gradually acquiring its own glamour and status. Just as well.

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The rather dismal and obvious conclusion to reach is that Indian men may have raging libidos but they leave their women dissatisfied and unfulfilled. Boors in the boudoir. Bores outside it. Louts in love. Dictators who demand but rarely give.

So . . . does the Great Indian Lover only exist in temple carvings and between the pages of the biggest lie ever told—the *Kamasutra*? It would appear so going by the 'voices' in this essay. The libido is there for sure. What's missing is the light (and right) touch. Once he learns to press all the appropriate buttons there'll be a lot more happy faces in India. Female ones at any rate. The women are willing to keep their collective frustrations on hold a little longer . . . what's a few years more when they've waited for centuries?

But the boudoir continues to remain the last bastion of at least limited privacy. As a therapist mentioned, 'An outsider

can never really know what actually goes on behind closed doors. My patient-profile has changed over the years. Earlier, men used to worry about physical performance alone. These days they discuss their psychological problems as well.'

Does that indicate a new sensitivity, a new awareness?

'Yes,' says Dr M. 'We are being bombarded on all sides by sexual imagery in one form or the other. Nearly every visual has sexual overtones. There is subliminal and overt sex on television. Our advertising is more upfront about selling sex. In the last couple of years, there have been any number of sexually explicit articles on the subject in popular family magazines. People discuss sex far more openly. Our young people are better informed. And now with the government propagating safe sex through mass media, most of the earlier barriers have broken down.'

Does he see this as a positive change? Or does he think it will lead to the sort of problems that have plagued Westernized societies—teenage pregnancies, higher suicide rates, child prostitution, single parenthood, abandoned children of unwanted pregnancies, increased abortions, alarming AIDS figures and greater STD (Sexual Transmitted Diseases) numbers?

The doctor takes his time before answering. 'The point is one cannot halt the revolution now. It has been set in motion with a ferocity and velocity that has caught most of us unawares. We will have to deal with whatever social repercussions it unleashes. But there is just no way anybody can put the brakes on it.'

Rites  
of  
Passage

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Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen



## Rites of Passage



AT BAGDOGRA AIRPORT IC FLIGHT No. 222 to Calcutta is delayed. By how many hours? They do not know. Will it arrive? It has to, there is a minister on the flight. Ground fog, engine trouble—does it matter? I resign myself to a book and one of those plastic orange chairs to further suffer the slings and arrows of that outrageous monopoly called the

Indian Airlines.

Flight No. 490 has arrived from Delhi and departed for Guwahati. Next to me is a figure in shades of grey, pale grey shirt and darker grey travel suit, travel worn, jet-lagged. The blonde hair needs a shampoo and her face is smudged with fatigue. But the grey eyes are hope-lit and riveted towards the entrance of the terminal. She has obviously come from Delhi. Luggage is heaped by her chair and there are several packages from Bloomingdales, Bonwit Teller and Estelle. Her nervous hands are arranging and rearranging them and the packages are almost bursting at the seams. She has not checked in her

luggage for the Calcutta flight so I gather she has come to the hills to stay a while. She must be waiting to be picked up; received she has obviously not been. All the taxis for the hill resorts have left with the Delhi passengers.

She fidgets so much that out of sheer irritation I want to offer her a cigarette. But had she been a smoker, she would have finished a packet by now. It is difficult to concentrate with people milling around and I am only dimly aware of someone coming up to her with an envelope. She opens it eagerly and mutely points to the shopping bags. The man picks them up and departs.

Several pages later I am aware that she is silently sobbing. I am not a believer in interfering with personal grief. But here is a foreigner in perhaps a land unknown to her. And, despite my aloofness, I do not believe in a world where to be unconcerned is to be wise. Between one person and another is a space with the grave's own silence but not its grace. Besides, I have no option. In the totality of her misery and isolation she has been weeping into my dupatta for quite sometime. I cannot pull it away, so I ask her if anything is wrong (rhetorical) and if there is anything I can do (more to the point). The story unfolds itself, chokingly and hesitantly at first, then starts falling like the vociferous equatorial rains, blotting out our immediate horizons, the dim lines of the small airport taking its leave in tears. We are just two women, separated by climes and cultures, oceans and attitudes, with nothing in common, not even our love for our own, particular men—for she is the boundless ocean in her capacity for giving; I, a rock bound by the sea, which no tidal wave can stir.

She is an American diplomat's daughter who studied for her BA in Education at Loretto College, Darjeeling. This was a long time ago in the mid-Sixties. Her father was then posted to India. She met an Indian and fell in love with him, the owner

of one of those many inadequately equipped hotels which keep mushrooming in holiday resorts.

He must have been just rich enough and just handsome enough to play the playboy-at-last-in-love role with impunity. She must have seen in him an Omar Sharif, Robert Redford and God judiciously mixed. Heaven, earth and marriage were promised and she blithely estranged herself from her family to live with him. A week before the marriage, he was very sorry but one of his retinue of girlfriends was pregnant, what else could he do? 'I promise this happened before I met you.' She believed him and returned to the US and to Oberlin, Ohio, to finish her MA.

Between then and now she has made eleven trips to India, bringing dollars, Mothercare products, vitamins, cosmetics: you name it. She is a guidance counsellor for several schools in the country in which she lives. It has never occurred to her that she needs counselling herself. He is into his fourth marriage. Each time she has come to India it has been because he needs help, someone to talk to. Financial help, of course, and to make him see 'reason'. Reason he has seen long ago in the form of greenbacks; what she means by reason, I hope for her sake, he will never see. This trip, which I am sure is not the last she will be making, was made because, once again, he had randomly and wantonly written to her that his third marriage had broken up and the divorce decree was to be finalized any day. Had she fallen in love or contemplated marriage in her own country? She was aghast at my question. He was the only man in the world for her! This time it was '... could we forget the past and start afresh, get married and never, never, be parted again?' And she came. Instead of the groom there was the messenger and the afore-mentioned note. He had got married a few days ago ... sorry, family pressures, you know ... yes, at least he could have come to the airport but it was expensive to drive down just to tell her this ... and could she send him the things she had brought?

Apart from pity and contempt, I also marvel at an emotion that endures despite the lack of nourishment and worse, downright cruelty. I think I begin to understand Samuel Birendra Lall's poem 'Cactus Love'. But such thoughts are dangerous. The need to constantly control one's emotions for fathers, husbands, sons and lovers is the price that a woman pays for personal liberty.

I ask her what she will do now. She will return to Delhi and then to her own country. At least there I can help. My face is familiar enough at the IA counter and she is first on the waiting list—unless there is a stretcher case. 'She is a stretcher case,' I tell the bewildered clerk.

But I know she will return whenever he calls her at whim, for 'he is so gullible, so vulnerable, so innocent you know' she has told me. All the things that *she* is, I think. What he is, is unprintable. I don't say it, for something in her stance tells me she will stand up for him despite everything, even the deadly blow he has just dealt her. '*Shayad unka akhri ho yeh sitam har sitam hum soch kar yeh sah gaye.*' She would understand this. But the word *sitam* is untranslatable. 'Perhaps this is the last time he will ask me to wear this "crown of thorns" (shall we call it) and so I wore it once again'. It is a situation beyond my inferior understanding, so I give her some oblique advice. See Erica Jong at Columbia University. She lives just off Bakersfield stadium. See Marilyn French at Boston. Maybe even Germaine Greer. The last names ring a bell. But she smiles and shakes her head, 'They wouldn't understand,' she says and she may well be right. It is impossible to help a world's sorority member so bent on self-destruction.

It is the last call for the security check-in for Flight 222 to Calcutta. A forlorn grey figure waves goodbye. There are a lot of bitter thoughts in my head but the uppermost and the most bitter of them is, why do I lack her depths? She reminds me of a pearwood sculpture I had once seen, "The Worshipper" it was

called. The neck and the shoulders, that heavy forward slant, the submission, the bowed look, a strange figure offering worship to an unseen deity, the face raised, blind, dumb, devoted, terribly strong, terribly fanatical—it was a terrifying emotion that that girl bore. Masochistic? Lacking self-respect? What I saw as I turned to wave just before I entered the aircraft, was something that made me shiver. What would she do the day she realized the mess she had made of her life? It was easier to be a land-locked sea.

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I like the women of my generation; the post-independence, post-Republic lot. I like our hardness, our ability to question even if we do not find the answers. Most of us are a bitter and battered lot. But we have faced a few facts. On the whole we have been fairly honest and stood up to and against public opinion and the accepted norms. But sitting here today, brooding over a lot of injustices, I wonder if we have not rejected too much, looked too many gift-horses in the mouth? Have we placed ourselves beyond the pale? Are we making it impossible for ourselves to break out of our prisons? And, above all, is it always a question of gender and sex? Yes, there was that American girl, but I have seen the exact reverse of this situation and in nothing is there a discernible pattern.

Take the case of the young American student, John. His name really was John. He was in the Eastern Himalayas on a sabbatical, a post-graduate student with hopes of an associate professorship in Comparative Religions. He was studying Buddhism and those aspects of Hinduism that had crept into the practice of the Buddhist religion. And he met Purnima. She was a planter's daughter, a planter who had risen from the ranks and was therefore at the age of fifty-eight only a senior assistant. The pert and pretty Purnima was his only child,

twenty-three and seething with unfulfilled ambitions, yet making not the slightest move towards fulfilling any of them. Night and day it was: 'Why did I have to go to the Government College instead of . . . ?'

'Because your father couldn't afford it.'

'But I could have sat for the half-scholarship exams.'

'Could you?' Purnima had passed her twelfth standard with fifty-two per cent marks.

'I wish I could go more often to the planter's club. There is nothing at the planter's club but . . . '

'You do go. Your father is a member.'

'Yes, but there are members and members,' she says bitterly.

In that Purnima is right. For all its apparent democracy, Darjeeling is still a feudal town where the Dorjes speak only to the Ladenlas, the Ladenlas speak only to the Pulzer-Gyalsens and the Pulzer-Gyalsens speak only to Lord Buddha. It is a town where Mark Tully is hailed with open arms and Sasthi Brata kicked into the gutter for an outspoken remark. As I said, there is no discernible pattern.

'Why don't you go and do something at the Sonada Monastery for a few days? There's work to be done there; all kinds of work that needs hands and heads and hearts to do it, human beings to see it done.'

I was sure that Purnima was not going to do any work but people from all over the world came to the monastery and this was a cheap way to get Purnima some exposure. She went, met John and they fell in love. They got married at the Consulate in Calcutta.

'Calcutta was lovely,' said Purnima, 'And just look at this ring.'

I looked at the piece of vulgarity, diamonds naturally, and something that John could ill afford on his scholarship.

John returned to the US to shift to a smaller university where it would be easier to get the coveted associate

professorship. He also had to find them an apartment and get together enough money for Purnima's ticket. All of this took about six months.

'John has sent my ticket,' said Purnima, 'and can you imagine his salary? It's twenty-nine thousand dollars per year.'

I could very well imagine John's salary. 'Purnima, twenty-nine thousand dollars' buying power in the States is that of twenty-nine thousand rupees in India. You will have to be prepared to live on baked beans and chicken livers, in a bed-sitter and perhaps a second if not thirdhand car for a long time. Your father's salary is much more than that. John and his people are not rich but they are good.'

Purnima went off—to Bombay, Teheran, Rome, London and New York. Only she never got there, for on the flight was an Arab who offered her all that money could buy and marriage. So she got off at Teheran and wrote John the 'Dear John' letter.

The tragedy is that by now she must have been passed from sheikh to sheikh and John, disillusioned, must have gone back to his Ivy League college. The lesson, if there is one, is never to advise a fool, never to tell them the truth. If I had said, 'Wow! Twenty-nine thousand dollars, that's a lot of money,' Purnima would have reached New York either to ruin John's life or become a better person herself through association.

But these are isolated cases. What generally applies to the Indian women of the middle and upper classes is that they come on the marriage market on sale—a machine, young and alive, energetic, smart and in working condition. It is a machine that cooks, washes, serves, sometimes earns money, entertains guests, keeps the house clean, fulfils the man's needs in bed and hopefully her own, of course, and generates his family. If it gets slightly shrewish, slap it or say cutting words and it will be all right. Not much maintenance, food, a few clothes. And with the machine comes a lakh of rupees. Hurry! Order right away.

Fortunately, most women feel satisfied with this state of affairs. They were nurtured and groomed for this. Sure, there were some hide and seek affairs at college in the full knowledge that these would come to nothing; for, even if there was true love, those boys would not be capable of earning anything for years, and what would these girls do in the meantime? So marriage it is, which gives the parents peace, a sense of achievement, of having done the best they could by their daughters. Says a young woman in her thirties, 'After I broke off that affair which I knew would end in zero, all I wanted was to get married to anyone of our own social standing. And I've done it. We are happy enough, we have two children whom we both love, we are fairly compatible and I feel secure. I also teach in a school.'

'So all's well that ends well?' I ask sarcastically.

'No. There are bad days. He shouts a bit, I shout a bit. We have flung plates, but who hasn't?'

I haven't but I have never, on the other hand, felt her smugness or security. 'And what about your sex life? Is it as mundane as everything else?'

'Look, I do my duty and if he isn't satisfied let him go elsewhere. Provided I know nothing about it, does it matter?'

This girl might have been in Georgian England instead of in India, 1992. As practical as Jane Austen. No, not a Jane Bennet and certainly not an Elizabeth Bennet but a Charlotte Lucas easily. 'A marriage proposal came for me,' she continues, 'I was tolerably composed. My reflections were in general satisfactory. My fiancé, to be sure, was neither very sensible nor agreeable: his society was irksome and any attachment he felt towards me was the result of his family's choice of me and therefore imaginary. Still, he would be my husband. Without thinking highly of men or matrimony, marriage had always been my object. Being a housewife was the only honourable profession for a well-educated young

woman or little fortune; and however uncertain of giving happiness, it had to be my pleasantest preservative from want. That preservation I have now obtained and at the age of thirty plus, without ever being pretty or rich, I feel all the good luck of it.'

It is a deadly piece of logic and leaves me dumbfounded. 'Look,' she continues, 'I admire women like you, I wish you happiness with all my heart, but the likes of you ought to know that if you met a man today and married him tomorrow you'd have as much of a good chance of being happy with him as if you had known him a lifetime. Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the disposition of the parties are ever so well-known to each other, or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently dissimilar after marriage to have their share of vexation afterwards or, in most cases, more than mere vexation and it is better to know as little as possible of the person with whom you are to spend your life.'

What she says is eminently sound but not everyone can act her way. One expects too much and therefore ends up getting too little.

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For roughly two decades, women have set down their impressions of the conflicts of the liberated woman and many more women have declared the falsity of those impressions. The year 1984 broke out with a delightful, playful article by the film gossip columnist, Devyani Chabal, who wondered what might have been the plight of three politicians, Mrs Indira Gandhi, Mrs Shalinitai Patil, Mrs Maneka Gandhi and actress Mrs Dimple Khanna had they not walked out while the going was good. Mrs Indira Gandhi was imagined cutting and serving wafer-thin sandwiches and pale tea at some opulent Parsee

home; Mrs Shalinitai Patil as swallowing and digesting frustration after frustration; Maneka Gandhi as the meek daughter-in-law following in firmly marked footsteps; and Dimple Khanna as being generally bullied and making trips to and from maternity homes, having facials and whatever it is that the wives of big-time stars do. It was a light, fanciful article, but one of adulation of these four women and the move that they had made. Then followed a harsh, pompous article by another female journalist, according to whom these women were opportunists. She said Indira Gandhi had walked out to play hostess in the prime minister's house under the mantle of daughterhood and motherhood; Shalinitai Patil in order to marry a chief minister; Maneka Gandhi was 'thrown out' according to this journalist and Dimple Khanna abandoned a man whose career was plunging downwards in order to follow a career of her own.

The habit of marriage is a hard one to break and before we pass judgement, it is important to remember that there is a middle path between total defiance and orthodoxy. These women did not walk out in order to better themselves; circumstances compelled them to. Ironically we hear of them only because they did in fact better themselves. Anyone writing about them must take into account the fact that the pendulum of time and events swings back and forth and the sensations generated by one-time events, will with the passage of years be no more recoverable than the scent of last year's flowers. And in all fairness we cannot overlook the spirit that made these women act as they did any more than we can forget the deeds themselves.

Indira Gandhi, more than any single person, was the product of her environment. At the age of seven, one sees her sitting in Lord Sinha's apartment in Queen Anne's mansion, listening avidly to her freedom-fighting, flamboyant father. More is known of her association with the leaders of the

Congress than of her romance and marriage with Feroze Gandhi. One sees her, next, as her father's official hostess, the mother of her sons, a minister and then the prime minister. The call of politics is like the gipsy's call—one must answer it or die. Or both. When two politically-minded people have lived together and found their ideals and associations an incomplete one, it is only merciful to settle for a break. Their only fault is a lack of harmony. What the rift was between Indira and Feroze Gandhi is a matter of speculation.

But it is a fact that a crime was committed long ago by the temple and the state in unison when ecclesiastical blessing and civil sanction was granted to a union for which the contracting parties were unprepared and unfit. Whatever her shortcomings as a politician or a wife may have been, Mrs Gandhi did not take with her the mantle of motherhood; she carried a yoke of responsibility. Two educationists who have taught both Rajiv and Sanjay testify to the impeccable behaviour of both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi with regard to the school authorities. 'When Sanjay was expelled, did Feroze Gandhi turn up?' 'No,' they both replied. Is such an irresponsible attitude on the part of a father less potentially reprehensible than that of a mother who leaves home? The brilliant Feroze Gandhi gave the world his journalistic masterpieces but what emotional security did he give his sons? It is little wonder then, that when asked if she would like the road adjacent to the Parsee cemetery in Allahabad, which is Feroze Gandhi's last resting place, named after him, Mrs Gandhi merely shrugged. The love of ten thousand prime minister fathers cannot make up for a husband's lack of it.

Instincts are older than the written word. It is a biological fact that the physically weaker tend to lean on the stronger. This need not necessarily be so in a man-woman relationship but in fact nine times out of ten it is so. For the man is both physically stronger and occupationally more secure. Shalinitai

Patil is censored for deserting a nonentity in order to latch on to Vasantdada. Ms Patil was a person in her own right. The reasons for a marital break-up are as nebulous as flowing water. Involvement in the same world as Vasantdada might well have brought the Patils together; so need one look for such villainous causes as opportunism or climbing the social ladder? If acrophobia is not one of your drawbacks, go ahead and climb, be you man or woman.

To shift to another plane—the actress Dimple Kapadia. When she married the then superstar Rajesh Khanna, the world was her oyster. *Bobby* had hit the box-offices like nothing ever had and she was just ‘fourteen summers old’. Without giving her own career a thought she gave in to the big star’s expectations. In the mid-Seventies, I saw a drunken Rajesh Khanna, already a flop, at a party in Oberoi Mt. Everest, pickled to his eyeballs. A beautiful, nervous Dimple Khanna fluttered around him much as a blind moth around a flame. Such beauty! Trumpets should have blown and cymbals rung out when she entered a room. Nine times she filled a plate and took it to him; nine times he shoved both plate and wife away. Patience and submissiveness have their limits and if that was an example of his behaviour towards her, the limelight need not have called Dimple away. It takes a lot of courage to tell the media that one’s husband is taking out the frustrations of a plunging career on his young wife. Call it the washing of dirty linen in public if you like; I call it the survival instinct.

The greatest good of those nearest and dearest to herself and her children is most important to her and very rightly so. Also, it was a difficult process to disappear from the celluloid screen for a decade and then to make it so big. No mean achievement. More cheer to those who can make their face their fortune, pick up the shreds of a career carelessly thrown away and then move ahead with dignity. But I must say this: when all’s said and done, Dimple may today be the greater star

but Rajesh Khanna is a great artist: remember *Red Rose*? Just the last scene is enough—a pathological killer in a cell, a vacant expression on his face.

If the media is to be believed, what Maneka Gandhi was reported to have done was a publicity stunt. By these accounts, the mother-in-law was too shrewd a politician to drive a young widow with a child out of her house. But the deed itself required guts, for in this case it was no ordinary mother-in-law but the Prime Minister, and no matter how it all turned out, there can be no taking that away from Maneka!

But for every Indira Gandhi, Shalinitai Patil, Dimple and Maneka there are a hundred women who have not made it. But one does not hear of them.

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Human beings, irrespective of their sex, are essentially gregarious and therefore interdependent. At every step compromises are called for, otherwise one must be prepared to snap into a million shards. The compromises of a married couple are too many and too varied to go into, ranging from finances and children to trivialities like putting off one's bedside lamp. Unmarried persons have less to compromise with themselves, and loneliness, but on the whole their chances of peace are greater.

Take the case of Anita. 'Look,' she hoots, 'at what this advertisement says.' It is in the matrimonial column: Mukherjee Babu, upper division clerk, is trying to marry his daughter off. 'A good-looking Bengali girl,' he says and, 'very well-educated.' Anita is indeed very good-looking and very well-educated, always on scholarships. So? 'Don't worry, Mukherjee Babu,' says Anita to me, 'I'm too busy fighting the battle for survival. That obscure college I mentioned and where you think I teach does not exist on the face of this teeming city.'

But there are other ways to procure the Becosules, the fruit and meat you so badly need. I'm fighting a battle, using my body as the weapon of war, the *Kamasutra* is my Bible. And now Mukherjee Babu wants to scrape the till, wants to get me married. Doesn't he understand that once I'm married off to someone, probably to an upper division clerk, I cannot help him any longer?'

I understand very well. 'But do you enjoy your work, Anita?' She confesses she does, it is much more interesting than teaching a classful of dolts, she studies her subjects; of course there is the chance of the odd pervert now and then but largely these men are lonely men—salesmen, out-of-towners on business. Contact persons? Many, many in the big hotels. Anita's problem is that she can only work in the mornings and afternoons. Is there much competition? Yes, there is. Not from professionals—soon they'll be an anachronism what with the changing attitudes towards sexual mores, just as important and just as negligible as food. Anita's competition comes from well-to-do housewives, coming along in chauffeur-driven cars—to coffee meets, they tell their husbands or drivers. Some of them can even stay the night; they have their husbands' permission to do so. But why? Well, Anita saves up what she earns and she donates it to the household. The others buy jewellery, saris, perfume and such things with their earnings. 'Those are the whores,' says Anita conversationally, 'not I.'

This was an example of survival, sex and the single girl. Let us take success and the single woman. The pedantic 1984 article mentioned before calls Mother Teresa, Yamini Krishnamurti and Lata Mangeshkar, the three most liberated women in the country today. Talent of the order the latter two possess places them in safer cocoons than marriage. As for Mother Teresa, her life is dedicated to an order. That she is protected by it naturally follows.

This essay does not concern itself with statistics, wife beating, dowry deaths, the special cells that the government has set up for the protection of the rights of women, etc. Those things have been well done, ill done and on the whole overdone. I consider that the average Indian woman ought not to weigh more than forty-five kilograms; the average Indian man between seventy and seventy-five. So if you are a woman who has been beaten even once, speak softly but carry a big stick as the excellent Roosevelt advised. You have your nails, your teeth, there are firearms strewn about the house as well as antique swords and daggers. There aren't? Not even a kitchen knife? Take the law into your own hands and face the consequences later. Never whine. But on this I am not an authority for my husband is as eiderdown and so are the husbands of most of my friends—physically. But have these men ever looked into us?

Years back in courtship, not combatants then, both were aware of what life really meant. Not complaining, but perhaps already spent. We talked of this and that, of cabbages and kings, while each knew that the other or herself might strike unlucky. And still there was a thrill in it. Each had scrutinized the other frankly and objectively, taking things at their own pace and at the same time falling in love. So both, it may be said, had the sense of suddenly seeing very plainly, the obvious future, the immense 'thereness' of another 'being'. And today we are willing to tell these partners, 'Your expectations are too hard for me to practise and I fear them as I fear the unknown. Whatever living moments I have had, have been lived by the values of my own codes. You stifled, negated and betrayed those moments. What have I done to my soul? I looked around me, this dismal wreckage that is now my world. It is the physical form of treason. I'm calling you, you who are my life partner, but you will no longer answer. You failed to recognize the humanity in my being, you failed to know me when I sat at

the other end of your table. You demanded that my behaviour was your property. Loathsome as such a claim was, more loathsome still was my agreement.'

But was this discontent always there and are we simply voicing it today? Yes and no. I spoke to an old lady, ninety-seven years old, dignified, beautiful and reticent. 'My husband was a very important man, a Rai Bahadur, Government Pleader and what not. Educated in England, naturally. We had everything that money could buy and our household was full of relatives, hangers-on, people in need. About sixteen women, the same number of men, children, servants. It was like that in those days for people who were rich. I looked after them all but rarely ever saw my husband alone. Once I asked him, "If your dhotis come from Manchester, why can't my saris come from somewhere abroad too?" He said, did I want to wear French chiffons when the rest of the women wore saris from the Imperial Mills in Kanpur? I did not raise the subject again but since I was the Princess of Darbhanga I got my French chiffons anyway. Only I'd seen my husband's point of view and would have felt foolish wearing chiffons. I realized I was the mistress of the household *de facto* and *de jure* but I as a person did not really matter.'

Was it a happy marriage?

'I suppose so, if you don't think about such things one day does pass smoothly into the next.'

'But,' says an old crone, this time from the slums, 'I saw to it that it was a happy marriage. I came to this household bringing no dowry and after a while the pestering started. My husband felt something for me no doubt but that little something was not enough for him to stand up for me against his entire family. But at nights, alone in our kothi on the roof, it was different, he was simply lustful. In the beginning, after a whole day's misery, I could barely respond but suddenly I realized that this was the only way out, so I (here she whispers

into my ear) kept at it for years making a reality of each one of his fantasies. That's the way to hold a man. Wantonness, brazenness and every bit pre-meditated. And I got to like it too. So infatuated did he become that I was figuratively able to tie him to my *payals* and lead him a dance not only through his family but through the whole *mohalla*.'

But take another kind of case, very close to home. My uncle-in-law, in fact, who married a European woman of great accomplishment; a great beauty, too, if you looked at the portrait that Elizabeth Brunell painted. She married him for his title, he married her because he wanted just that kind of hostess and together they rose to great political heights. But they were an incompatible couple whose marriage was based neither on love or even respect. Let me describe to you, as best as I could fathom, his feelings when she died. These, of course, are impressions: he went into the room where the coffin lay, moved a hairbrush an inch to the left with some surprise, as if his movements were divorced from his hands. As if they were related to the objects touching them only in the way that two flies blowing and blundering in space are related to a china and mahogany world. 'I am free now,' I almost heard him think. He must have thought it many times since the moment he suspected his wife's silence. Realized that the bitch had died in her sleep. He had left the prospect of freedom unexplored. It was less from a feeling of remorse than from knowing what to do with the gift of freedom. Anything more concrete, he would have wrapped in tissue and laid in a drawer, knowing at the back of his mind that it was there, it was his, something to possess for life. But now—freedom?

He would not mourn like the others who would cry for the dead until they had appeased the world and exhausted what they understood to be sorrow. The white of his love was smudged with hate, the black of his habits knotted tight. This

was a couple who would now be ninety, not hidebound by conventions and there was no lack of money.

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Not one of these cases have taught me much about the man-woman-sex-liberation relationship in our times. But I have learnt a little from nature. Sitting on the sea-shore I met this little wave, not dancing, not swirling, just touching the shore forlornly from time to time.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ I asked.

‘Nothing, but everything.’

One more forlorn move and then, ‘You see, I loved this great, positive, definite rock for a million years. All day and all night I pestered him: come live with me and be my love. For your sake I will give up dancing, being carried away to other shores, flirting with the breezes, I’ll do anything. Since I had known him for ages, let’s call him “the rock of ages”.’

‘And then?’

‘And he had not budged for a million years. But suddenly, he said, yes, yes, come ruin me; for God’s sake come and ruin me. I thought he meant it and took what he offered and he disintegrated into the sea.’

‘And what did you do? Look around for another rock to batter and ruin?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘He was the only rock in the world for me. Now I shall sink to the bottom of the ocean and look for grains of him. I meant my sacrifices; they only exasperated him.’ And with that she was gone.

There is very little that is definite in the man-woman relationship today. A little warmth, a little ice. It is an impressionistic relationship, it’s shadowed, you cannot pin it down. One meditates revenge maybe on wakeful, moonlit nights. Against whom? Men and women, good and bad are all

in half-darkness. They follow against all reason a gleaming hope concerned respectively and reciprocally with each other's faith in life. There is always of course the villain, 'circumstance', but he is only half-wicked and deeply baffled by our questions as well as the 'plot' called modern life. So one has to shrug him off and start treading the scene again: unchained. 'Liberation' is being both sanctimoniously exploited and censored. Both sexes are running with the hare of irresponsibility and hunting with the hound of propriety. We have forsaken the temple of Equal Rights for the canopy of Propaganda and it is not astonishing that despair and confusion should be the logical outcome.



# The New Outcastes

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Rinki Bhattacharya



## The New Outcastes



IT WAS A FEW MINUTES PAST midnight. Some friends dropped me home after the party. I noticed the watchman peer into their car, his eyes followed me closely as I walked towards the lift. As usual, I turned off the landing light after turning the key to open my flat. Immediately, darkness swept me into its eager embrace . . . .

I have no one else—sometimes a maid or a visitor. I have been alone for ten years or more. No, I am not an orphan, my mother's family lives within the mile. I am not unmarried, nor a widow . . . my husband lives next door.

We were divorced after twenty-seven years of marriage. Children, yes, there are three of them. Two live with their father. I see them, sometimes. Not every day. Over the years after the separation, whenever I protested against social injustice, my first concern was the needless trauma of the children: 'Why must divorce separate children from mothers? Fathers? Why burden children with adult problems?'

I was reminded: ‘This was your choice.’

I know that accusation. The ‘your’ slightly accented. I know too ‘divorce’, for me, (and for other women, whether I know them or not) was not a ‘choice’. It was a necessity. As inevitable and tragic as death. Something both men and women cannot evade beyond a point, nor resist. With a high premium on marriage, family life and the obligatory male heir—divorce, is the most uncertain liaison in Indian society. If there is anything more uncertain, it’s a long-term emotional involvement with an already married partner.

And yet, how often do we find divorce and extra-marital affairs the only living reality for women. For those condemned to remain ‘*nathbati anathbat*’ (one who is like a widow though she has a husband). For women linked by that single reality across cultures . . . sharing their destiny as women, wives, mothers, and then unexpectedly without social status . . . the universal ‘outsiders’.

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‘That’s her, your new kakima,’ Subirkaka had said with startling casualness, nodding in the direction of a shuttered room leading away from the veranda where we stood. Through a thin, fluttering curtain we could see the contours of her seated figure, huddled awkwardly upright on a large double bed. A red-bordered saree covered her frail frame. Our new kakima, the heroine of Subirkaka’s famous love story, was too plain for my romantic flights of fancy. She seemed very unlike a story-book princess. And though I was still naïve, and impressionable, I remember Subirkaka’s facetious air filling me with a strange foreboding.

Eagerly, mother led us into the shuttered room, to inspect the new immigrant into our large, extended family of adopted kakas and kakimas. The new kakima quickly got up, touched

my mother's feet—then turning to us, she smiled. What a serene, shy, childlike face!

'Come, sit next to me,' she said, touching my cheek, striking up a lifelong friendship instantly.

The two, Subirkaka and Kakima, courted one another for nine long years. During this phase, she nurtured his wild talent, directed it. When Subirkaka went underground, or to jail at other times, Kakima's duty was to wait for her wandering lover. Finally they married, and moved to Bombay.

Their two-storeyed suburban bungalow was always overflowing. It housed elderly relatives, needy cousins or plain fortune-seekers. Despite the noise, the clamour and unruffled by domesticity, wifely obligations, motherhood, I'd often find Kakima sitting before a bowl of tiger lilies, quietly transferring beauty from nature to paper with deft confident strokes. She'd disappear for hours, then return with her sketch pad, every page filled by exquisitely rendered landscapes. Her countenance reflected unshaken inner harmony. I could not help thinking of the wide distance that lay between Kakima and her noisy, untidy surroundings. What a contrast she was to other happy wives who were content to cook, shop and feed.

One day, returning at the usual hour from school, I was surprised to find a group of women in our drawing-room, with my mother at the centre. Mother's vehement deliberations halted on seeing me.

'What are you doing here amongst grown-up women?' she demanded annoyed. 'Go, go to your room.'

I had time to glimpse Kakima's red-rimmed eyes, her lowered head, I heard her trying to stifle sighs. Mother's determined voice uttering disapproval pursued me relentlessly. I ran to the remotest corner of our house, plugged my ears, hoping to shut out the words and images that threatened to uproot the quivering seedlings of an adolescent's faith in love, family, marriage, husband.

It's more than thirty-four years since Subirkaka left Kakima, and their children, for an aspiring young starlet. Kakima is undivorced. She did not protest. Every time Subirkaka visits Bombay, she receives him with that same serenity, hiding the destroyed woman in her ageing body.

'Did you never think of leaving Subirkaka? Divorcing him?' I've asked, teasing her a little.

'You are like a daughter to me . . . what can I say ? Your kaka is so clever, he planned everything. Every year a child, every day those lies . . . the shame of it . . . I am angry with myself for not protesting. Tell me, what good is it protesting? He doesn't own me, nor the children. In public, only his new family is known; what he has done is beyond contempt. I cannot forgive him . . . I stay silent because my silence conveys great love and great hatred . . .'

Kakima's gentle soliloquy fades out, she is not entirely convinced about her oppression.

'Next time he comes, I'll shut the door on your kaka, shut it forever,' she says to herself, making a supreme effort to sound angry.

Pain stirs Kakima to momentary rebellion—but that mood does not last long. Soon she is her compassionate, warm self. Kakima's humanism never fails to overwhelm or disturb me. I know she is unable to carry out her threats to boycott Subirkaka. He knows it too. If Subirkaka uses this knowledge as power against a woman who continues to love him . . . Kakima's love is her only defence against divorce, its fall-out and social conflicts. Women like Kakima are married to the alluring myth of marriage—they know of no other option outside this reality.

Even so, I consider Kakima an early warrior for female autonomy. It's another matter where her destination led her in the final analysis . . . that she could not change her destiny from Subirkaka's legal wife to any other. She remains an inspiring

instance, keeping my faith intact in humanism. I suspect too, in her intuitive way, Kakima realized the link between class and patriarchy which oppresses the poor and women alike . . . a lesson we learnt much later, with our own cultural experiences, and through the lives of women who were turned out of marriage.

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Didi was our family ideal. The example of an obedient daughter set out before us. Beautiful, accomplished in the fine arts, Didi was shown to numerous candidates before the arrival of the finalist.

Everyone was suitably impressed with the credentials of the finalist. 'Binodbabu has found the perfect son-in-law,' they said. 'He comes from a wealthy, traditional family, they own a mansion in Ballygunj, what's more he is handsome too.'

Didi's marriage will always be remembered for its elegance, its inspired attention to detail. A splendid colonial riverside bungalow of vast proportions, carefully selected for the important event. She was the first daughter of our house to be married. No elegance was spared. A reunited family—coming from far and near, took up the pleasant duty of 'giving' Didi 'away'. And thus, the day after her wedding, we assembled for the poignant send off. I remember holding back a rush of hot tears, but as the car engine bearing the bridal couple revved up for the journey, a wrenching wail so charged with anguish escaped us, that even the gods may have been moved. I could see the groom's averted face, a slight indication of guilt and discomfort, and Didi's veiled profile—behind the crimson chiffon.

Marriage suited Didi. She seemed to glow every time we saw her. Her in-laws insisted that she look and behave like a newly-wed, and Didi looked the part. At home there was much

rejoicing, ‘our daughter has been settled well’. There was not a gap of too many years between Didi and her husband. As in most Indian marriages, any other differences, of taste, habit, were to be bridged by the wife. Whatever the price, however irrational the demand.

Didi soon became an expert in being the good wife. The obvious cultural disparity which existed between Didi and her in-laws was treated as a joke with comic anecdotes; or at times by indifference and apathy. A woman of independent will, Didi surprised us with her resilience, her passivity. She told us how, one day, summoned to make her father-in-law’s tea at four a.m., she was barely awake. To her horror she realized she had been buttering her arm instead of the two pieces of toast in her hand. We laughed aloud that day, but there was something very discreet, something unsaid, that haunted my mind for me to remember this anecdote not with any sense of ease.

True, Didi was learning to survive. Be the good daughter-in-law, the ideal wife, but her bouts of asthma lasted longer, became more vicious. Didi’s husband complained about his ‘sick wife’. Didi laughed less, she became a poignant shadow of her radiant, luminous self. None of us realized Didi was killing herself silently. That she bore the burden of every daughter—could she let the family down? Reveal her dead soul? She had overplayed the part of a dutiful daughter too long for anyone to believe she was dying and in need of help. Didi’s pretence to happiness, her patience, sustained their marriage for a quarter of a century. Then their son grew up. He was a modern young man, with different dreams. When her husband insisted that the son join their family business, as all sons of that wealthy house had for numerous generations—he rebelled.

Before Didi knew or understood, the verdict was passed: ‘You can stay with ONLY one of us—choose,’ said her husband. In a small voice, afraid of losing either, Didi pleaded

first with son, then husband. But the son was a mere excuse. The decision had already been made. Her divorce came through, uncontested. Didi was handed a few rupees as compensation for being her husband's legal wife; he remarried within a year . . . and the son married next.

Didi still cannot accept the finality of her divorce from the husband she worshipped and loved. In many powerless ways she continues to seek 'forgiveness', begs him for a 'little place beneath his roof'. She is mocked, and called 'stupid, shameless, crazy'—society acts as judge and jury condemning this husbandless, homeless woman for expressing ancient emotions beyond their dry comprehension.

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I understand why Parvati did not take off her mangalsutra after her husband died last year. It's the sole symbol of the male protection, she thinks, that saves her from dishonour. I understand too, why Sitabai prefers to live with Bikhu who beats her every night. The certainty of one man's abuse is better, she says, than abuse from many. I know why Taru—separated from Suresh—does not file for divorce. She has to pretend everything is as it was. These are conveniences society imposes. Few of us can cope with the altered position outside a marriage. Or be the universal 'outsider'. Moreover, in India we can never be rid of caste. One takes the place of another. Divorcees are the new outcastes in postmodern India.

Compelled to struggle, survive one crisis after another, our behaviour is monitored vigorously, more than before. By neighbours, family, watchmen, maids. Not many can cope with the process of alienation, survive as single women, the '*nathbati, anathbat*'. Many wives return after a period of protest, and doubly endorse the institution of marriage, making those who did not return socially more vulnerable, suspect.

True, our dreams as wives, as women, mothers, nurturers of the earth, left us unprepared for this final parting of ways from our ‘life partners’ and our socializing did not train us to accept divorce as a life choice as it did marriage, family and all things connected. This is, however, only one aspect of why women are fearful of opting out of violent or lifeless marriages; the greater reality is their total lack of power as ‘daughters’ in our society. Expressed vocally in all languages, women are born as somebody else’s property. Nothing can better express their hopeless plight than this quaint Tamil saying:

*Raising a daughter is like watering a plant in your neighbour’s courtyard . . .*

Or the one in Bengali:

*A daughter grows as fast as a banana tree—let her stomach weep a little.*

Once given to her legal master, a married daughter forfeits all rights to return to the natal hearth. Except on chosen social occasions, no married daughter is welcomed home. She may be burnt, killed, or may even commit suicide but her place is next to her husband. The constant refrain married daughters hear is ‘adjust’, stay silent. From Rig Vedic times, we hear of abandoned wives living wretchedly in the homes of their fathers. There are no instances, though, of women who denied their husbands of their own accord. For such a woman to gain even a lowly position in her father’s home is unthinkable, to say nothing of an honourable one.

If in the earlier era, widows were named ‘husband-devourers’, the women who are called *kṛitya* (blood-thirsty, demonic female) in Sanskrit—today’s divorcees have inherited that disrepute. The image of the woman as the

archetypal victim remains unchanged in all cultures, in every generation, across class, caste, culture, in media, reinforcing oppressive attitudes.

I did what I thought was right, when the oppression grew unbearable. But for all of us . . . Reena, Lalita, Mona and myself there is always too much to explain, to be justified over and over and over again. Divorce becomes a war without mercy—an agonizing choice for Indian wives, whose role as ‘single women’ does not hang together convincingly.

Unless we recognize and respect individual conscience, we cannot afford to talk about justice. We will continue to endorse obsolete obsessions that have stifled our voices, killed our souls, murdered for many centuries . . . .

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When I return home to no one, turn the key to let myself in, I wonder, if this is my destiny. Is this the price for freedom? Is there freedom at all? Soon my silent, dark flat glows with images and voices of women, those I know and some who visited briefly. I understand again the meaning of shared grief, and shared existence. And know that although society isolates me, refuses to accept my unknown self, I am alone no longer . . . .

I’d like to end by paraphrasing Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*—I want the city, and the countryside, I want to be mother, wife and poet . . . .



Survivors:  
Changing  
Attitudes  
to Divorce  
Among  
Women  
in India

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Indira Jaising



## Survivors



I WRITE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of a lawyer who has chosen to represent women in a situation of the breakdown of marriage. I have done this not because I see women only as the victims of an unjust social order but rather as carriers of social change. My experience in representing them at a point of crisis in their lives, at a point when they have to make a decision which will either pull them back or take them to an accelerated and advanced stage in their lives, has proved to me that they opt for change with all its attendant risks and come out winners. Before discussing changing attitudes it is necessary to recognize how recent the very concept of divorce is in this country.

The concept of divorce for Hindus was introduced in India for the very first time in 1955 by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. Until then, marriage was an indissoluble union governed by Hindu religious laws and the code of Manu. When, therefore, one is assessing changing attitudes towards divorce, one is in

fact assessing the impact of the introduction of a revolutionary concept into the social fabric of our society, less than forty years of age.

Marriage for Christians still remains a pretty indissoluble union inasmuch as the Indian Divorce Act, 1869, makes it virtually impossible for a Christian woman to seek freedom from an oppressive marriage. She can do so only if she proves that her husband has been guilty of incestuous adultery or bigamy with adultery or marriage with another woman with adultery, or of rape, sodomy or bestiality or of adultery coupled with cruelty, or of adultery coupled with desertion for a period of two years and upwards. Predictably very few Christian women have succeeded in proving any of these combinations and have either remained in a bad marriage or got on with their lives and entered into informal and extra legal liaisons or have simply abandoned their spouses.

Divorce among Parsees was introduced by the Parsee Marriage and Divorce Act, 1936, on grounds of cruelty or adultery or non-consummation of marriage or unsoundness of mind.

Divorce for Muslim women was introduced by the Muslim Woman's Dissolution of Marriages Act, 1929. At first sight, the measure may seem to be progressive. However, it was introduced to prevent Muslim women from converting to religions other than Islam as a way of getting out of a bad marriage. To this day, it remains a largely unused law. In contrast, divorce for a Muslim man is easy. He can pronounce a divorce by unilaterally uttering the words '*Talaq, talaq, talaq*'. Muslim women remain more divorced than divorcing.

Under the Hindu Law, divorce can be obtained by a woman on fairly liberal grounds. Voluntary sexual intercourse with another person, cruelty—mental or physical—desertion for a continuous period of not less than two years, being of unsound mind, suffering from a venereal disease or leprosy in

a communicable form are all grounds for divorce. In 1976 the expression 'mental disorder' was defined in an extremely liberal manner to include schizophrenia or a disorder resulting in abnormally aggressive or irresponsible conduct. In 1976 also, for the first time, the concept of divorce by mutual consent was introduced in Hindu Law. Of all the religious communities, therefore, the largest number of cases of divorce that go to court are from among the Hindus. The upsetting of established political equations with religious minorities (and their attendant vote banks), has led all politicians to leave the minorities' personal laws alone. It is against this backdrop that changing attitudes to divorce must be assessed. The typical urban middle class woman suing for divorce in India is likely to be a Hindu.

The first observation to be made is that Indian women have adapted to divorce with amazing speed, either when they have been sued for divorce or they are suing for divorce. From my experience, I can say that a larger number of women are suing their husbands for divorce than the other way round. There is no typical age group within which they fall. Women have sued for divorce when they attain the age of fifty and above right down to the age of marriage, i.e., between eighteen and twenty. There is a new confidence about these women, born out of the expanding economic opportunities available to them in the job market. With that has come the knowledge that marriage is not the only option for a lifestyle. Their aspiration for an equal relationship within marriage and a life with dignity are so firmly established that they are willing to break the marriage if they don't find it. These aspirations are often the cause of a woman opting out of a bad marriage.

Contrary to popular belief, it is no longer demands for dowry or physical violence that are the cause of women opting out but the urge for self-determination and self-experience. Certain repetitive patterns can be observed within the

framework of a joint Hindu family. Sometimes parents-in-law live with the sons and daughters-in-law and sometimes two brothers, both married, and the two sisters-in-law live together. Daughters-in-law have complained of unwanted sexual advances from the fathers-in-law. The husband is often aware of the sexual harassment by the father-in-law, but chooses to overlook it as life within the joint family is the only workable alternative from his point of view. Many women, finding their husbands too weak to deal with the situation, have sought divorce. Another variation to this problem is that of the elder sister-in-law striking up a liaison with her husband's younger brother and bringing him under her control to the exclusion of the younger sister-in-law. Often this is done to gain control over the family empire and to ensure that the control of the elder brother over the estate is total. Such situations too have led to the younger sister-in-law opting for divorce. I have also had to deal with cases where the woman has complained very bitterly of the husband sexually harassing his own minor daughters. In all these situations the woman's natal family has helped her and has also supported her decision to divorce.

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In its legal form, the institution of marriage is intimately tied up with sexuality. It is almost as if marriage laws exist to legalize sexuality, punish any deviation from legally sanctioned rules and, of course, to legitimize the children of the marriage. Hence non-consummation of the marriage, refusal to have sexual intercourse, adultery, unnatural sex, impotence are all grounds for divorce. Lack of sexual compatibility and unfulfilled sexual needs have been major grounds on which women have sought divorce. This again reflects their changing attitudes, a willingness to recognize and articulate their sexual needs rather than be content with being

passive recipients of their husbands' sexual needs. When women sue for divorce, their major concern is with the post-divorce syndrome, namely what kind of economic arrangements will be made by the husband for her and the children and who will have custody of the children. When being sued for divorce, similar considerations enter into the making of a decision. In practice, very few cases get litigated to the bitter end. Most are settled out of court in the process of litigation.

Consistent with the emphasis of the law of marriage on the legalization of sexuality, sex has always figured as a major factor in divorce and a large number of cases are filed for divorce on grounds of impotency of the husband. Withdrawal from sexual intercourse has been held to amount to cruelty entitling a person to divorce. The one major factor that has caused discontent to women is that rape within marriage is not considered an offence. Thus if a man rapes another woman he can theoretically be hauled up for rape and punished, but if he rapes his own wife, he is not committing a crime. Once again, this reflects the law's male bias. It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at any time. Thus, even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (of rape) as her consent is assumed. In this respect, the women's movement has consistently demanded that the law of rape be changed. A recent judgement of a court in England indicates that rape within marriage can be an offence. Several states in the US have specifically amended their original law to make it an offence.

But while rape within marriage is not an offence, it can be and often is, a ground for divorce.

This opening up of the option of divorce has enabled women to opt out of an oppressive relationship. Women who opt for divorce are those who have already changed their

attitude to marriage. In fact, changes in attitudes to marriage precede changes in attitudes to divorce. Today's younger generation do not see marriage as inevitable and consequently divorce is not a traumatic experience. The other important observation is that women who decide to opt out of marriage are supported very strongly by their families, materially and emotionally. Women who opt for divorce have brought to the forefront the most amazing sources of energy in a situation of breakdown. Even in the role of victims, they have nurtured their reserves of energy and have been able to make the transition to a new life which is revolutionary in the true sense of the word. Every woman who has come out of a broken marriage has been conscious of the fact that she is creating an alternative lifestyle, one which society did not have a place for because the concept of divorce itself was not known before. While it is true that a Hindu male also could not divorce prior to 1955, it is almost as if he did not need a divorce because there were no restrictions on his marrying more than once. The converse was not true for the Hindu woman. She could neither seek a divorce nor could she marry more than once. And so, today, when one sees a Hindu woman on the threshold of divorce either as a victim or as an initiator, one is witness to the birth of a new social order.

Take the case of Asha. Married with two children between the ages of six and four to a man whose nefarious business deals she was aware of, and may also have been a party to, she was the victim of physical and verbal abuse. Yet you never saw a trace of self-pity on her face. The need for divorce, the need to get on with her life, was a desperately felt need. She stopped at nothing to achieve her aim, hiring detectives to prove his adulterous relationship, collecting documentary evidence of his income and assets and tape-recording evidence of his verbal abuse. He too in turn stopped at nothing, denied the marriage, accused her and her mother of running a brothel, alleged that

she was an unfit mother. Who knows what the truth really was? I did not care. But one truth I was aware of and witness to: Asha's amazing persistence in seeking her divorce and making a new life for herself on her terms.

The battle between the two stopped at nothing. During the course of the proceedings, there was a shoot-out at her house in which her husband was injured. She was arrested for attempting to murder and released on bail. She survived even that. Finally, her husband entered into a settlement and agreed to the divorce and a financial settlement in her favour. Some would say that all she was really interested in was the property. I did not look at it that way. She was a woman in search of a new life without the daily humiliation of violence and abusive language but was not one to walk out of a bad marriage without creating the material basis for a new life. She got on with her life after the divorce, not by remarrying but by finding other fulfilling relationships.

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Women's concerns today have shifted from their marital or social status to their economic status and emotional well-being. Their concerns have shifted to the new life on which they are likely to embark. This could be another marriage, it could be a new relationship, it could be a new job or a new business enterprise. Women have displayed an amazing speed in getting on with their lives after divorce. To many in their thirties and forties a second marriage has been the chosen option. Most of them have gone on to make very successful second marriages, despite the fact that they have taken with them the custody of their children.

I recall Shanti. When she finally took the decision to get a divorce she was in her early thirties and had three minor daughters. By then she had become a professional in her own

right and was financially independent. She had married into a wealthy family. Her husband preferred to spend his life doing nothing, living on his inherited wealth, and sometimes on her earnings. Shanti had obviously decided that such a life was not for her. There was of course the usual drunkenness and sometimes violence, but the motivating force for getting a divorce was not that. It was quite clearly the need to assert her identity and the search for self-respect. She quickly re-arranged the pattern of her life before she filed a suit for divorce. She moved out of the matrimonial home. She had a close relationship with another man who was married but whose marriage had broken down. Breaking social barriers, Shanti decided to live with the other man. Taking full responsibility for her three minor daughters, she sued her husband for divorce. He did not contest for the custody of the three daughters, in fact, I suspect he was delighted that she took them. All he demanded was a financial settlement. Shanti agreed and paid him a hefty sum of money and got her divorce. She continued to live with the other man along with her three daughters. All of them have now gone on to become highly educated women with promising careers.

This is not to suggest that the whole business of divorce was not traumatic for Shanti. But the trauma came not from her decision, but from the agencies she had to deal with, the fact that she had to justify her decision in a court of law, the fact of having to relive the trauma in the court. It is true that Shanti was able to do all this because of her economic independence. What is interesting is that she did not see herself as a victim nor did she act like one. What is also interesting is that she took responsibility for three minor daughters knowing full well that attitudes towards female children in society are different from attitudes towards the male child. She realized that she could be taking on the responsibility of 'getting them married' but that did not deter her. Fortunately, Shanti's success story, success

being defined by her ability to reorient herself successfully in society in a post-divorce situation, is not unique.

Young and attractive by any standards, Anita was married into a wealthy family. At the time she decided to file a suit for divorce she had two minor children. It was a joint Hindu family consisting of several brothers, their wives and children. They lived in a huge family house, each family as a separate unit. It was obvious that Anita's husband was the 'drop out' son of this wealthy family about whom they did not care. While the other brothers went on to become industry leaders, he was the outcast. The marriage between him and Anita was over. He was involved with another woman, she with another man. Anita's relationship with her mother-in-law was very cordial. She decided to opt out of the marriage. She filed a petition for divorce. Immediately the contest was no longer between her and her husband but between her and his family which took every decision for him. Their basic instinct was to protect the family empire from the 'outsider'. The family was united in opposing any financial settlement for her. She was equally firm that she would not walk out of the marriage without claiming what was rightfully due to her. She was quite willing to take custody of her two daughters. He was willing to give them up. One day when she was out on a holiday, the entire family in conspiracy with their lawyer, threw all her belongings into a godown and locked her out. When she returned from her holiday she found the door to her house locked. It was then that she decided to seek legal advice.

We filed a suit to recover possession of the house. Anita never forgave her husband and his family for the way she and her children were thrown out of the house. What hurt most of all was the fact that the children were made the victims of what was obviously a fight to protect the family empire. Under court orders, we had to make an inventory of the articles found in the warehouse in an attempt to prove that she was actually living

in the house before the forcible dispossession. For Anita the endless hours of sitting in a warehouse accounting for every moment of her past life was the turning-point in her attitude to the family, the death of the last, surviving vestige of any affection she might have had for them. She never forgave them for rendering her children homeless. The suit ultimately resulted in a financial settlement and a divorce for her. She went on to get married, creating a new home and leading a very fulfilling life. But it is obvious that she will carry with her the trauma of having her personality violated by the family. In her case the fact of divorce did not cause the trauma, it was the process.

Prema was a professional architect married to a man who was totally disinterested in her. She had two daughters. The usual story of violence and cruelty was missing. But Prema could not take the total lack of intellectual compatibility, the absence of any meaningful relationship and his indifference to the marriage. She had taken a decision to opt out. When she decided to file a petition for divorce, he refused consent. In a further attempt to dissuade her, he denied her custody of the children. Prema was deeply involved with her two daughters and had spent a lot of time and energy bringing them up. Yet, when confronted with the choice, she decided to get a divorce and leave the custody of the daughters to the father. The divorce went through. Prema got herself a new home. She made it possible for the children to come and spend weekends with her. It was not an easy time for her. There was the usual brainwashing by the father against the mother which resulted in the alienation of the children. But Prema persisted in creating a warm environment for them to come to if they chose to do so. Much later she went on to get married and create a new life for herself. The children have now grown up and the social realities of her life have changed. The question of divorce or not to divorce did not dominate her life. The decision was made and then quite swiftly implemented.

Married for more than twenty-five years, Rupa was the victim of extra-physical and mental abuse. Abuse had become such a pattern in the family that her children too started imitating their father when they grew up. Perhaps that is when she took the decision to divorce. Not young by conventional standards, she went public on the cause of the breakdown of her marriage. Her husband did not resist the divorce, nor contest the custody of the children, (who in any case were grown-ups and able to take their own decisions) but only the financial settlement.

By now this was becoming a familiar syndrome to me. Men resisting not the breakdown of the marriage, but having to pay for the consequences of it. After years of battling it out in court he finally agreed to the divorce but with no financial commitment. Rupa admits that her evenings are long and lonely but she has never regretted her decision to divorce. It has given her some sense of clarity about her priorities and has helped her to redefine her life. Neither age nor fear of social stigma deterred her from standing up for her rights.

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I have spoken at length of the middle class urban woman seeking divorce. But I must make mention here of another syndrome that I have observed in upper class women. The pattern of oppression against women in upper middle class industrial families is a genetic and generational one. At any given point of time, at least three generations of women opt to stay within bad marriages in exchange for the material comforts they have. It would be interesting to write the history of any big industrial house from the perspective of the women married into the family. Male behaviour in these families is scripted to repeat itself, so is the female response. The

oppressor and the oppressed have arrived at an equation which allows the woman to accept her inferior status in return for the advantages of upper class living. Such women, as a general rule, have not opted out of their bad marriages but helped sustain the oppression.

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The success stories I have written about might convey the impression that all is well with the legal system. It is not. From my experience I would say that having to face the courts is perhaps the most traumatic phase of a divorce situation. Most judges are male, and the conservative procedures don't help. One has to 'prove' cruelty, as if one's state of mind can ever be proved. Incompatibility is not a ground for divorce in any of the laws. You cannot just get a divorce because you want one, unless it is by mutual consent. The need to justify the decision to divorce is the most demeaning process. A woman who opts for a divorce in a court of law is made to feel she is on trial for her sexual preferences, her motherhood and her devotion to duty—which equals blind devotion to the husband. Judges have not changed their attitude towards women and, by extension, to divorce. The image of the martyred, sacrificial '*Sati-Savitri*' is the legal norm from which no deviation is accepted. As a result, the woman is made to feel like the guilty one. I have known of a judge who said that a divorced woman was not entitled to the clothes she wore because her husband had paid for them. I have heard of another judge who said to a man accused of bigamy, 'I hope this time you will be blessed with a son.'

It is time we introduced 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage' as the key ground for divorce. An attempt made in 1978 to introduce such a change was shot down from a most surprising quarter: a women's organization. They argued that

husbands would start abandoning their wives with great ease. The Indian woman, they argued, did not wish to carry the stigma of being a divorcee. It was a stillborn law. I think this was a typical case of the spokespersons of women being more backward than the women themselves. Statistics relating to divorce are not systematically maintained and very difficult to get hold of, but I suspect far more women are suing for divorce rather than the other way round. There is a great need for radical reforms in our divorce laws. The introduction of 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage' combined with community property laws would go a long way in bringing them in tune with the aspirations of women.

Women who say 'no' to a bad marriage are not victims. They are actually saying 'no' to the unjust norms of a society in which the balance of power is in favour of men. In that sense, they are the creators of a new social order. They have not waited for the law to create a new social framework for them, but have made a new law. As a lawyer, I have always found it a challenge to represent women as I believe each new case gives me an opportunity to create a new law. Because the law is so loaded against women, representing them means testing the frontiers and the far corners of the legal universe. What, after all, is 'cruelty' and how does one prove it? Must it be confined to battering, alcoholism and womanizing? Or is it the denial of her womanhood, the refusal to accept her female energy and presence. It is almost as if to be a woman and a wife are a contradiction in terms. To be a lawyer representing women in a court of law, is to fight for the recognition of the female sex, for the acceptance of her sexuality, her gender and not her marital status. And to be a woman lawyer representing women is doubly a challenge, to fight for your own acceptance and for the acceptance of your client as a human being. I have succeeded. One test of this is that despite the dominant prejudice in favour of men, women are prepared to be represented by women lawyers.

I have often been told ‘you are so male’. But the truth is the reverse. People say, ‘You must be so aggressive representing such hard core issues such as the victims of the Bhopal tragedy and the pavement dwellers of Bombay.’ But, here again, the truth is the reverse. I once had a dancer friend who was visiting Delhi. She happened to be around when I was arguing the Bhopal case in the Supreme Court and came along to listen to the arguments. At the end of it, she told me that she was amazed by the visual impact of my presence and presentation which was totally feminine. It is this femininity that the judges cannot take, whether they are male or female themselves. It is this femininity that they cannot accept in a woman lawyer or in a woman seeking divorce. They don’t know how to cope with it. And it is this shared bond which binds me to the women I have represented. They have survived and I have survived too, despite the legal system and not because of it. They, each in their own way, have been the embodiment of positive energy. It is what we have shared together that has kept us friends long after they stopped needing me as a lawyer. After an encounter with such women I always feel like humming Marley-Tosh’s all-time classic:

*Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights  
Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight.*

Common  
Sexual  
Disorders

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Prakash Kothari



# Common Sexual Disorders

## *Immortal Liaisons*



LIAISONS ARE IMMORTAL! WHERE there are mortals, there are liaisons. Mortal liaisons are instinctive. Mortals, not being islands, have liaised (I use the verb to connote both cohabiting and bonding) with fellow mortals since time immemorial.

Throughout history, they have been celebrated and immortalized all over the world. No region or culture exists where there have not been liaisons. It is human nature to liaise.

Incidentally, they often serve an important procreative consequence also. Prudent nature, by providing an inherent human tendency towards liaisons, has ingeniously ensured the sustenance and continuity of the human race. Hence, 'To exist is to liaison, and to liaison is to exist. To cease to liaison is to cease to exist.'

## **Liaisons—Basic Considerations**

Before commencing an examination of the various kinds of liaisons, at this preliminary juncture, it would not be inappropriate to indulge in theoretical foreplay by broadly considering the basic mechanics that are sequentially responsible for these liaisons. Essentially a liaison or encounter is initiated by desire followed by erection in males and lubrication in females, leading to intromission, and finally culminating in the orgasmic event. Thus desire, erection/lubrication, intromission and orgasm are the spectra of interaction which constitute a whole and wholesome liaison or interplay.

Desire, which is the result of various psychological and environmental stimuli, is the initial sensual inclination marking the commencement of the sensual response cycle which may or may not culminate in an orgasm. Thus, in essence, desire remains a psychological phenomenon. Erection and lubrication are the physiological reactions to desire after sexual grounding has occurred. Sexual grounding is a cognitive phenomenon occurring at the cerebral level, involving a departure from the usual state to the sexual state; only after this psychobiological change, are sensual inputs perceived as sexual. Thus, sexual grounding accompanied by erection/lubrication marks the onset of the sexual response cycle. The term intromission describes the coital interplay encompassing the act of penetration by the male and the corresponding reciprocation of acceptance by the female. Orgasm, occurring at the peak of sexual arousal, usually accompanied by the events of ejaculation in males and vaginal contractions in females, is the ultimate event of the sexual response cycle.

Desire, erection/lubrication, intromission, orgasm and

ejaculation/vaginal contraction are the cardinal parameters that essentially need to be considered in the evaluation of a sexual dysfunction. A detailed inquiry into these parameters enables one to rapidly and precisely zero in on a specific diagnosis or elucidate the direction for further investigation. Such an inquiry would comprise specific questions into each parameter such as—the increase or decrease of desire; the quality, angle and sustenance of erection; the occurrence, increase or decrease in lubrication; the adequacy, duration and nature of foreplay; situational factors; coital-history-position; the duration and mechanics of coitus; the occurrence, quality and early or delayed reaching of orgasm and finally, the occurrence and nature of ejaculation/vaginal contractions. A complete medical history and examination including past history, family history, personal history, history of drug ingestion and a general, systemic and local examination should follow, as and when indicated.

This system of evaluation has proved to be invaluable clinically, in the rapid, precise and effective management of patients even in the busy set-up of an outpatient department, as is evident at the K. E. M. Hospital, Bombay.

### ***Orgasmic Liaisons***

An orgasm is the ultimate, overwhelming event in the realm of subjective human experience of pleasure. It can be scientifically defined as 'a cerebrally encoded neuromuscular response at the peak of sexual arousal, by psychobiological stimuli, the pleasurable sensations of which are experienced in association with dispensable pelvic physiological concomitants'. Orgasm or the pleasure principle, is the inherently sensual pleasure-oriented side of our personality which drives

one towards sexual gratification. Therefore, nature with this masterstroke has ingeniously accomplished the dual objective of ensuring pleasure for the species as well as the procreation of the species. However, subjectively, the pleasure principle has, is and always will be principal. It is interesting to note that different people in the diversity of their ethnic, geographic, socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds are united in the expression and description of the orgasmic experience, which, they unanimously agree, is a sense of supreme bliss and ecstasy, a feeling of enough and nothing more. In Gujarati it is called *sukh* (happiness), *santosh* (satisfaction) in Hindi, *samadhan* (satisfaction) in Marathi, *sukun* (perfect satisfaction) in Urdu, *shanti* (peace) in Sindhi, *trupti* (satisfaction) in Tamil, and *santrupti* (perfect satisfaction) in Telugu. In Kashmiri it is called *khushi* (ecstasy). The Bohras call it *paramsukh* (eternal happiness) and slum-dwellers refer to it as *nasha* (intoxication). The English-speaking world calls it climax or orgasm. In German it is called *orgasmue* (pleasurable convulsions with lust), the Japanese refer to it as *zettuchokan* (ecstasy) and in Chinese it is *shin gao chau* (supreme pleasure).

Orgasmic dysfunctions may be broadly classified on the basis of a single central parameter, the subjectively reported orgasmic experience, as follows:

- Early Orgasmic Response (EOR)
- Delayed Orgasmic Response (DOR)
- Impaired Orgasmic Response (IOR)
- Absent Orgasmic Response (AOR)

These essentially represent the discrepancy between one's idealized expectation and one's actual experience.

In our country EOR is the most commonly reported disorder in males. Hence, correspondingly, DOR and AOR are

the most commonly reported disorders in females. Orgasmic experience is usually followed by a refractory period in males. The ability to experience multiple orgasms one after another, without an intermediate refractory period is called multiorgasmia. A small percentage of enthusiasts do seek professional help to achieve multiorgasmic capacity. Here, it would be appropriate to mention that females have no such intermediary refractory period. Hence, for females, multiorgasmic capacity is a natural potential whereas for males it is necessarily an acquired art.

### ***Popular Liaisons***

Popular liaisons are heterosexual and imply the whole spectrum of interaction, that is the entire gamut of motions and emotions between two individuals indulging in 'play'. This encompasses the entire range of events, beginning with foreplay and ending with afterplay.

Foreplay kindles desire and marks the beginning of interplay. Adequate foreplay ensures adequate arousal promoting sexual compatibility. However, it is unfortunate that foreplay has failed to receive due respect and attention in accordance with its importance in popular liaisons. It is difficult to define the anatomy of foreplay. There are no rules in foreplay. There is no prescribed traditional or contemporary method for foreplay which may prove effective for all given situations. One has to individualize one's foreplay and realize that foreplay need not necessarily begin in the bedroom. Foreplay outside the bedroom is often more romantic, imaginative and significant than that inside the bedroom. Foreplay may begin with an amorous phone call, a bouquet of roses, a romantic couplet, a serenade or even a meaningful look. In contrast to

this, in the bedroom, it would principally involve mechanical, tactile foreplay. The inadequacy of foreplay may well be attributed to inadequate knowledge, or to situational factors such as the lack of privacy, joint families, working couples, socio-economic factors or other considerations.

The interplay following the foreplay can be made equally imaginative in a multitude of ways and should not be restricted to the usual, thus inducing ennui. A variety of places, atmospheres and positions, may be tried to introduce an element of novelty. Different variants, such as oral congress, may also prove satisfying. Another important fact to remember is that this entire interaction is through active interplay. It is unfortunate that couples, after the act of penetration, often cease all activity and patiently wait for the orgasm to come failing to realize that 'nothing comes from nothing'.

Inadequate knowledge of the mechanics of this crucial interplay is a common cause of sexual dysfunctions, including impotence, failure to penetrate in males and dyspareunia in females. Failure to penetrate may often be the result of an inadequate knowledge of the genital anatomy or the assumption of an inappropriate position. For example, it is difficult for a man to penetrate if he positions his legs outside the woman's. A simple thing like this may have serious consequences such as the non-consummation of a marriage.

After considering the mechanics of interplay, it is important to realize that one has further to go. Sensual afterplay is equally important as it increases satisfaction, promotes sexual compatibility and may rekindle desire, reviving the passion satiated by recent gratification. Another fact which one must recognize and accept is that female sexuality is given less importance though it is as important as male sexuality. This 'de-stress' on female sexuality and female sexual disorders is distressing. An inherently greater sex drive is not the prerogative of either gender. Sexual urges are equal in males

and in females. Studies carried out reveal the female's preference to being the active partner, a liking for the superior position and also the existence of female masturbation. Therefore, the female is an equally responsible partner in the interplay and the onus should not rest only with the male. It is encouraging to note that females are emerging from their traditionally passive role and learning to be more assertive and independent.

### ***Alternative Liaisons***

Any liaison apart from the popular heterosexual liaison may be termed as an alternative liaison. Though it is difficult to explain individual preference for an alternative liaison it is not necessarily an aberrant, deviant or unnatural liaison.

Sexual attraction towards and/or indulgence in sexual activity with partners of the same biological sex as oneself is called homosexuality. Lesbianism is a specific term for female homosexuality. It is reported that homosexuality is more common amongst males than females. Bisexuality involves attraction towards and/or indulgence in sexual activity with partners of both biological sexes.

Apparently alternative liaisons are more popular amongst individuals who are promiscuous. They are therefore prone to health hazards such as Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), rectal prolapse, sphincter incontinence, etc. Research reveals that the majority of people have had one or more alternative liaisons at one time or another in their lives. This suggests that an isolated casual alternative liaison does not necessarily indicate a persistently alternative preference. Both male and female homosexuality as well as bisexuality are far more common

than thought of and are definitely on the increase in India today.

Alternative liaisons would also include paraphilic such as fetishism, transvestism, zoophilia, pedophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, masochism and sadism amongst others.

### ***Marital Liaisons***

A marriage is not merely the legal or religious formalization of a social institution. It is, ideally, a close or intimate association or union. Interplay is an important, albeit small, part of the marital relationship. When indulged in it rejuvenates, and relieves boredom by ensuring adequate intimacy. It helps overcome problems due to communication gaps and stress.

Virginity is popularly but mistakenly given false importance as a major pre-consideration to a successful marriage—it makes, in my view, ‘a big issue over a small tissue’. It is considered important for the female to bleed on the wedding night to prove her virginity, and in certain orthodox communities this needs to be documented by the production of the blood-stained bed linen for public display. Technically, a virgin is one who has not had sexual intercourse and this can apparently be verified by an intact hymen. This parameter is, however, unreliable as a girl who has an intact hymen may have had sexual intercourse—if she has an elastic hymen or a high-placed one—whereas a girl who has never had intercourse may not have an intact hymen, as the hymen may rupture during exercise, the use of tampons, etc. Thus, it follows, that one may have virgin individuals who are not chaste and chaste individuals who are not physiologically virgins.

An extramarital liaison is a dangerous liaison which can compromise the stability of a marriage. When confronted with an extramarital liaison, one must remember the seriousness and sanctity of one's marital relationship. The harmony of this contract should not be disturbed by trivial 'affairs'. A time like this is a time for introspection wherein one must try to identify the cause for the extramarital affair. As far as possible, one should try and make amends and remain friends. Adultery is a serious business, but if it is merely a casual encounter and not emotional adultery then it is wiser to 're-pair'.

### ***Conceptional Liaisons***

Strictly speaking the concept of conceptional liaisons involves only liaisons resulting in conception (and liaisons after conception). However, the scope of this can be broadened to include contraceptive liaisons also.

Though conception is often the direct consequence of a liaison, in instances where this fails to occur when one wants it to occur, professional help may be sought. After ruling out organic causes, couples are usually encouraged to have planned sexual relations on specific days of the menstrual cycle, which may be determined by parameters like the basal body temperature. Thus, couples have to schedule their relations according to a time-table and report these to their physician. (It must be said here that it is difficult for one to synchronize passion with a calendar or a thermometer!) This certainly introduces a mechanical element resulting in performance and situational anxiety which impairs one's sexual response. These cases can usually be helped by supportive psychotherapy and behaviour modification. Further, contrary to popular belief, simultaneous orgasms or

different positions have nothing to do with conception or contraception.

After conception one can continue to have sex during the pregnancy. An obstetrician may be consulted regarding indulgence during pregnancy, as each case needs to be evaluated individually. It is possible, however, to safely indulge in sex till the day of delivery by suitably altering the position so as to ensure that no direct weight falls on the uterus.

After a normal delivery one can safely resume sexual activity if the episiotomy scar has healed and there is no active bleeding *per vaginum*. This is usually over in three weeks' time. Abnormal foetal presentations, prolonged labour, mismanaged labour, unsupervised labour instrumentation or mismanaged episiotomy can all result in vaginal laxity decreasing the peno-vaginal contact and hence, reduced coital pleasure. Post-partum Kegel's exercises for tightening the perineal muscles often prove effective in improving the perineal muscle tone and correcting vaginal laxity. In fact, Kegel's exercises should be advised to improve vaginal tone even after a normal delivery. In sharp contradiction to popular beliefs neither a vasectomy nor a tubectomy affects hormonal levels, sexual desire or one's sexual functioning in any way whatsoever. Though a vasectomy is a relatively simple and safe procedure to perform as compared to a tubectomy, it is unfortunate that a tubectomy is far more popular amongst the masses, probably because of traditional social norms or male chauvinism.

The condom is freely available and is the most widely used contraceptive in our country today. It is an effective contraceptive and its effectiveness can be further increased by combining it with a spermicidal jelly. It has advantages like protection against Sexually Transmitted Diseases, virtually no complications and freedom from systemic side effects. It could be even more popular but for a slight reduction in the intensity

of pleasure, the need for repeated motivation and the fact that it is a male-oriented contraceptive in a predominantly male-dominated society. Though oral contraception is commonly practised only amongst the urban populace, ignorance regarding its use does prevail. It is believed that contraceptive protection is established from the first 'pill cycle' and that it continues long after discontinuation. This too requires daily motivation, even for protection against an isolated or casual encounter. Most women are unaware of what to do if they forget to take one pill. Though an effective contraceptive, certain medical contra-indications and side effects associated with its use, account for it being relatively less popular. Intra Uterine Contraceptive Devices (IUCDs) are widely used post-natal contraceptives, more common amongst the lower socio-economic groups. They are cheap, effective for a prolonged period, do not require repeated motivation and do not hamper coital pleasure. However, the increased incidence of menorrhagia, dysmenorrhoea, pelvic inflammatory diseases and lower back pain, may decrease the popularity of IUCDs.

### ***Misconceptional Liaisons***

In our country, as in most countries, rampant myths and misconceptions probably constitute the single most important aetiological factor responsible for making one's potentially certain liaisons uncertain.

The most common misconceptions prevalent amongst males are associated with the habit of masturbation. It is believed that masturbation is physically harmful, leads to the dissipation of semen and may cause acne, insanity, weakness, impotence, curvature of the penis, dark circles around the eyes, etc. The single most important misconception is that habitual

masturbation in one's youth results in the lifelong impairment of one's sexual function. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Another prevalent misconception is that the loss of semen through masturbation or sleep emissions is physically detrimental and that the conservation of semen results in longevity, robust health and spiritual excellence. Semen is constantly being secreted by the genital apparatus to be excreted and it is impossible to hoard one's semen even if one wants to. Also the mere attempt to preserve one's semen, without any additional health measures or precautions, cannot possibly result in longevity or robust health. Further, it is the control of one's desires and passions that is advocated for the attainment of spiritual excellence and not merely the conservation of one's semen. Here, one must clarify that masturbation is common amongst females also, and is not exclusively a male practice as is popularly believed.

Another common condition is the 'Dhat Syndrome' which is nothing but a condition acquired due to the repeatedly enforced misconception propagated by quacks in popular newspapers and magazines, exploiting the fear of those who pass the 'vital fluid' in their urine. Here, a twofold misconception is involved: one, that it is semen that one is passing and two, that the loss of semen is harmful; both of these are scientifically incorrect. At times, just after an erection, a drop or two of a sticky transparent fluid which is a secretion of the Cowper's glands or the Bulbourethral glands oozes out from the tip of the penis. On seeing this some couples assume that ejaculation has occurred and cease from further interplay and hence fail to reach orgasm.

There is absolutely no substance to the widespread belief that the length or width of a penis affects interplay or orgasm in any way. Most of the nerve-endings in the vagina are situated in the outer one-thirds, the inner two-thirds is almost insensitive. Thus, an erect penis that is just two inches long is

adequate to satisfy a woman. The elasticity of the vagina makes the girth of the penis a relatively less important factor for adequate peno-vaginal contact. Unfortunately this myth regarding penile size for sexual gratification is prevalent among females also.

As with penis size so also with breast size. One finds a plethora of advertisements for increasing breast size. The fact remains that no creams or medicines help to enlarge the breasts. Certain exercises do help develop the pectoralis major muscles which adds a little bulk to the chest but not the breasts themselves and this may help to apparently increase breast size. However, expensive plastic surgery may prove useful. Before going in for this kind of surgery a woman needs to be aware of the fact that larger breasts are not more sensitive to stimulation than smaller ones.

The 'G-spot' which is much talked of today, is situated on the anterior vaginal wall about two inches from the introitus. This is a very sensitive area and has the maximum potential for arousal. When stimulated by the sliding of fingers with forward, backward or side to side movements, the G-spot swells like a nodule and becomes firm. Simultaneous clitoral stimulation can enhance sexual pleasure. However, all women may not enjoy stimulation of the G-spot; hence, it is best to ask the partner about whether 'to do or not to do'.

Sex during menstruation is prohibited by certain religions and most couples don't indulge in it thinking it to be dirty. The fact remains that, if partners desire it, sex during menstruation is not only safe but may be more enjoyable. Satisfying sexual intercourse during menses reduces cramps and alleviates the feeling of heavy discomfort resulting from pelvic congestion. In addition, there is the relative freedom from the possibility of a pregnancy and an enhanced sensation promoted by the moist vagina.

Circumcised males having better orgasmic control than non-circumcised ones is another popular myth. In fact, circumcised males are more likely to contract non-gonococcal urethritis than non-circumcised males. An intact foreskin acts as a shield for any irritating lesions on the glans following herpes or other infections. It is unfortunate that many baby boys are forcibly circumcised without anaesthesia and a healthy, normal part of their body is cut off without their consent.

Female circumcision is also prevalent among certain communities. This barbaric custom varies in the extent of the mutilation perpetrated. In India it is performed, luckily, in its mildest form, involving usually the excision of the clitoral hood alone. It is performed due to the misconception that a clitoris left intact makes a woman promiscuous. Healthcare providers and surgeons must make best efforts to see that this harmful and unnecessary practice is discontinued.

### ***Geriatic Liaisons***

Sexuality is something that one generally does not associate with senior citizens. Hence, the single most important fact to recognize about geriatric liaisons is their existence. The longevity of one's sex life is limited only by one's biological life. Ageing is normal, but to be aged is pathological. The physiological changes which occur with ageing may slow down one's sexual functioning. Therefore, in males, one need not be permanently discouraged from sexual activity by an isolated failure to perform. In females, menopause marks the end of one's reproductive and menstrual cycle but not one's sex life.

Common organic conditions which can impair one's sex life in old age include conditions such as atrophic vaginitis,

decreased testosterone levels in males or arthritic changes. These may be corrected by systemic or local estrogens in females, testosterone supplementation in males and advising comfortable positions for individuals with arthritic problems. As depression is also commonly encountered in these individuals, psychological support often proves far more valuable than medication.

### ***Uncertain Liaisons***

As a general rule what is good for the whole body is good for sex. In keeping with this, what is bad for the body is bad for sex. Hence, medical conditions affecting one's overall health would certainly render one's liaisons uncertain. These would include conditions such as hepatitis, heart disease, diabetes mellitus, hypertension and the ingestion of drugs like antihypertensives, antiandrogens, alcohol, sedatives, drugs of abuse, etc. Also detrimental to proper sexual relations are ailments like phimosis and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, including AIDS.

Sexual dysfunctions are common among diabetics due to vascular or neurological causes. With existing heart diseases one may continue to indulge in sexual activity if permitted to do so by one's physician. Some general precautions are to avoid elaborate meals or alcohol immediately prior to intercourse, to preferably indulge in the morning when one is fresh, to take regular physical exercise so that sexual activity is not an unaccustomed exertion and to use nitroglycerine ointment or to keep such a capsule handy, just in case. Moreover it is dangerous to believe that the partner-superior position ensures safe sex for a cardiac patient. Controlled hypertension *per se* has no direct effect on one's sexual functioning. Some antihypertensive medication, however, may

have sexual side effects. If and when this happens, it is usually possible to revise a prescription and provide relief.

Phimosis, a common condition, giving rise to painful intercourse is easily relieved by a minor surgical procedure. With the increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases including syphilis, gonorrhoea, hepatitis, AIDS, etc., one should take adequate precautions, such as avoiding encounters with strangers or individuals in high-risk groups, and using barrier contraception, such as condoms.

### ***Provocative Liaisons***

Under this we shall briefly liaise with elements which are popularly believed to enhance one's sexuality (aphrodisiacs). Such provocative elements could be psychological or pharmacological, both of which have been extremely popular since the beginning of time. Psychological elements help evolve mental imagery involving one's ideal partner or one's ideal love situation, either from memory or by employing literary erotica such as paintings, pictures, poetry or even a passage from erotic literature. The efficacy of most of these psychological liaisons is indisputably established.

Some of the popular pharmacological elements are alcohol, ginseng, testosterone, papaverine, hashish, marijuana, rhino's horn, vitamin E and Spanish fly amongst innumerable others. The usual mechanism of action is either the alteration of the mental state or alteration of blood flow to the genital apparatus either by local or systemic effects. In my opinion the most effective mode of action is the all-important mechanism of suggestion. One's devoted belief in the product often helps more than the product itself. It is interesting to note that some of these aphrodisiacs remotely resemble the genitals, which

probably accounts for their 'efficacy'—a belief known as the 'Doctrine of Signatures'.

Though ayurvedic herbal sex tonics are popularly and empirically prescribed today, their efficacy is questionable. Ayurvedic principles regarding the growth, collection, storage, duration of efficacy, administration and most importantly, the individual rationalization of these medications is not adhered to in most of the preparations.

Ayurvedically speaking, the incongruity between 'prescribed' ayurvedic principles and the use of ayurvedic sex tonics, prescribed today, is too vast for them to be of any therapeutic value.

Alcohol is essentially a central depressant. When taken in small doses it removes social inhibitions which probably accounts for its popularity as an aphrodisiac. However, the description given to it by the literary genius, William Shakespeare, is unfortunately, but indisputably true. Moreover an isolated failure due to alcohol can give rise to performance anxiety during subsequent encounters resulting in repeated failures and psychological impotence. Though extremely popular, the beneficial effect of ginseng on sexual desire or potency is probably as remote as the supposed resemblance of its root to the male phallus. Testosterone too, though often (ab)used for its supposed aphrodisiacal effect, is seldom effective, its usefulness being limited to those exceptional cases wherein there is a genuine lack of the hormone in the body. Its irrational or empirical use may have serious side effects. Judicious supervised use of papaverine when indicated may prove extremely beneficial. However, unsupervised use may lead to priapism, scarring, bruising, fibrosis and curvature of the penis resulting in organic erectile dysfunction.

Needless to say, no guaranteed pharmacological aphrodisiac is in existence today. Another interesting observation is that pharmacological sexual aids are more socially acceptable

(even amongst the orthodoxy) than the psychological ones.

So far, the only effective natural aphrodisiac is an attractive affectionate partner, passionately asking to be enjoyed.

### ***Towards Healthy Liaisons***

The approach towards healthy liaisons ideally involves education about the anatomy and physiology of the human reproductive system, conception, contraception, personal hygiene, psychosexuality, sexual differences and modes of sexual behaviour—all these provide the background for the development of a healthy responsible individual capable of recognizing and comfortably accepting his or her innate sex instinct to its optimal potential without being obsessed by it. Such an approach also goes a long way towards improving the orthodox and prudish social environment which often causes unresolved conflicts between sexual drives and social norms, thereby generating anxiety and often frustration. This process can start at any age where the mind is curious about and receptive to conceptual inputs. Whether a person is a child, teenager or adult, education is necessary wherever there is a lack of adequate knowledge. This may be carried out either at home, in schools, through books or through the mass media.

### ***Mortal Men, Immortal Liaisons***

Ancient Indian geniuses have left us a rich cultural heritage on the subject of liaisons, one that is probably unmatched in world history. The enormity of their effort, minuteness of

observation, maturity of thought and honesty of outlook are indeed commendable. Their ingenuity has deservedly survived their mortal existence, as immortal masterpieces, and continues to inform, educate and stimulate us.

The genius of the celibate poet-sage, Vatsyayana, textualized as the *Kamasutra*, over 1,600 years ago, has captured the attention of the world for centuries, and remains to date the greatest and most popular masterpiece ever written on this subject. At the beginning of his monumental orchestration (*magnum opus*), Vatsyayana, with characteristic humility, acknowledges previous literary efforts by saying that he has merely compiled the essays of earlier stalwarts, along with a few of his own observations, into a lucid condensed volume for perusal by the common man, thus providing an insight into the ageless history of this ageless tradition. There have been innumerable other voluminous masterpieces by various literary giants during different eras in Indian history, each with its own individuality and flavour. The more famous amongst these include—the *Babhravya Kamasutra* by Babhravya, the *Kokashastra* by Kokapandit, the *Ananga Ranga* by Kallyana Malla, the *Shringar Shatak* by Bhartrihari, *Rati Rahasya* by Kokapandit, *Jayamangal Tika*, a commentary on the *Kamasutra*, by Yashodhara and others.

One comes across references towards a healthy sexuality even in Indian yogic philosophy. The carvings at the famous temples of Khajuraho, Belur and Halebid, the sun temples of Konarak and Modhera amongst many others, are an artistic treasure-house highlighting the splendour of mortal and celestial liaisons to the keen and appreciative observer. They bear mute testimony to our rich cultural past. Truly, the wealth of material on this subject, in ancient India, was colossal.

Almost all the scholars who put together these masterpieces were respected sages of their times. As a result, their observations were exceedingly well thought through and

could even give modern sexual medicine a tip or two. They emphasized a preventive art to be practised by all, whereas modern sexual medicine is largely a curative science practised only by professionals. Further, it is outside holy temples of worship that the frankest of carvings have been observed, indicating the traditional sanctity associated with basic human relations. Somewhere in time we seem to have lost this social honesty and mutual mortal associations are now often considered immoral, discussions on them are taboo, and writing about them is a social sacrilege. Sadly, somehow, somewhere the immortal has come to be considered immoral . . . .

As a direct consequence of these social inhibitions, information on the subject is meagre amongst the masses, with its attendant social problems. Dissemination of information on mortal liaisons will go a long way in cultivating an improved social environment.

### *Changing Liaisons*

‘Styles may come and styles may go but liaisons go on forever.’ The homo sapiens’ instinct for liaisons is probably the oldest one in the world. Human nature is essentially dynamic and the only constant characteristic is that change is the essence of our attitudes. Though the inherent instinct to liaise has always existed because of our subconscious desire for change, we have seen different attitudes towards liaisons during different times in history depending on the period, socio-economic development, prevalent traditional customs and effects of the media. Regional variations have been innumerable, the East predominantly differing from the West and one culture from

another. Even amongst individual cultures values have continually varied over time. However, despite changing trends, the more things change the more they remain the same.

Today with better health standards the average human life span has increased; this, coupled with the fact that puberty arrives much earlier, has meant that the duration of the sexual career of an individual has proportionately increased. Further, the importance attached to economic independence, an increasingly career-oriented approach to living and the global population explosion coupled with the rapid expansion of the mass media has resulted in a delay in the average age of marriage. There is more independence among the youth, more of a preference for remaining single in the urban population (living together being the 'in thing'), more liberal attitudes, promiscuity at all levels of the socio-economic strata and a corresponding increase in sex disorders and sex crimes. The latter is also probably due to the lack of adequate and proper sex education.

There is also an increase in women's sexual awareness. The emancipation of women has led to an increased recognition and acceptance of women's sexual disorders. In the out-patient department of sexual medicine at K. E. M. Hospital (the only department of its kind in the country) the number of male and female patients has increased but the increase in the proportion of females as compared to males is much more . . . .

Earlier, people would usually come to be treated for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (venereal diseases), whereas now more and more patients come with problems of erectile failure, failure to experience pleasure, etc. Further, men and women initially used to come for curative problems but today many sexually healthy males and females come to learn how to increase their pleasure.

It might be said that today we are aping the West. Despite the awesomely advanced knowledge of sexuality in ancient India, in our time we are no longer the trend-setters but have opted to be followers . . . The cycle has been completed . . . Or has it? Only time will tell.

A  
Village  
Idyll

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Mulk Raj Anand



## A Village Idyll



SPLASHES OF RED AND ORANGE  
mingle into an aura of burning gold  
and, in a flash, the sun rises over the  
rim of the village pond, resplendent.

Gauri comes treading on the  
pearls of dew on the tufts of grass by  
the ditch to fetch water, with a pitcher  
under her arm.

*Oh the fair one. Oh, ripe like the  
juice of a sugar cane . . . .*

Govind sighs as he sits rubbing his clothes with soap on a slab of stone. The glow produced by the brisk movement on his face ripens into crimson and his breath almost fails.

Gauri shyly draws the end of her dupatta over her head and dips her pitcher in the water, but, as she leans forward, the tips of her brave breasts are silhouetted against the skyline.

'May I be your sacrifice!' Govind whispers the familiar ejaculation of heart-squanderers in the street of Verka. And, as though the words are potent like a magic spell, the blood rushes down from his head to his heart and loins, the centres of storm in his peasant soul. 'Oh the fair one!' he hisses. And the hisses splutter into an embarrassed cough.

At that Gauri laughs even as her pitcher gurgles with a series of hysterical reverberations.

And with that their love started. For, in the tickling of her throat and the saliva on his tongue was the meeting of long distances, of uneasy colloquies, of thumping hearts and reckless yearning.

She stood before him, her breasts heaving towards the morning, her senses sinuously touching the edge of demure restraint, her blood warming and melting and leaping like flames towards a ceiling in a conflagration.

He stared at the wonder of her, his body taut, his breath swelling and unswelling to the tune of his now frightened heart, his soul reaching out to some expression from the groin of endless silences. She seemed like some shimmering cloud image, veiled in sheaths of innocence. ‘Ha!’ . . . the exclamation escaped from his throat involuntarily. And he leant towards her like a tiger towards a young doe.

With a shrill shriek she ran, leaving her pitcher where it stood at the edge of the pond. And, as she raced up the steep bank, her torso straining forward but her legs behind, she knew she was defeated and burst into a smile.

Govind caught her and flung her on to a dune. She fought back, digging her nails into him and kicking him with upraised knees. He swung her from side to side and pinned her arms to the earth and lay down on her.

‘Oh, let me go,’ she said, with tears in her eyes and laughter in her mouth. The colour on his face called to the radiance on her cheeks. And, giddy-eyed, she relaxed, till his lips touched hers. And now she swayed as though her soul was in a delirium of giving.

‘Someone will see us,’ she whispered.

But, storm-tossed, scampering, wriggling hard, twitching with the concentration of nerves outstretched for months in desire for her, in a fierce felicity, he was intent on the

dissolution of her energies, the melting of the snows of her virginity . . . .

A little distance away, on the track leading to the rivulet, Lehna, the son of the landlord, went twisting the tails of his bullocks, goading them to drag the manure-cart quicker. Govind flapped his arms like a protective male bird covering his mate under his wings for Lehna was his rival. Gauri snuggled up to him like a cooing female bird. And thus they lay in the heat and the sweat, their voices rustling like the silks of Lahore and their faces glowing above the dune sands like two luminous wild flowers jutting out of the earth. The sun shone above their heads.

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The sun shines, and the moon takes light from it, as also the stars. And on the earth, going round the sun, through the eternal movements, we possess in our spines all the planets, as well as a thirsty love and the desire to die in order to be reborn . . . . And from the dying, and through the rebirth, there grow lotuses among the reeds, the flaming smiling pinks, pushed up in the quagmire by the vital spark that keeps things alive. In the fruits, flowers, foliages, among the birds, beasts and humans, the same glorious urge prospers. And there is creation.

Gauri smiles like the demure morning. Govind laughs like the temple drum. There is the voice of Shiva in their throats. And in their touching is the burning of several planets, the extinction of worlds, the smothering of heavens, the dissolution of hells, and the springing of a serene pleasure, muted like a prayer in which we rest, sometimes as before a new miracle and sometimes, as before, the juxtaposition of legs intertwined in a ridiculous posture.

And thus begins a cycle.

Govind met Gauri in the lentil field on the first full moon

night of autumn when everyone was awake and merry. He lay with her in a hay barn on the eighth day of the new moon before winter, when people were feasting at night after fasting the whole day. And he took her on every moonlit night in the winter. For, after the first flush of raw passion had expended itself under the sun, they began more and more to lend themselves to the mellow light of the moon. Govind wore clean clothes and Gauri always had flowers in her hair.

As Gauri went to meet Govind in the fields by the river on one eclipse night, however, her mother saw her.

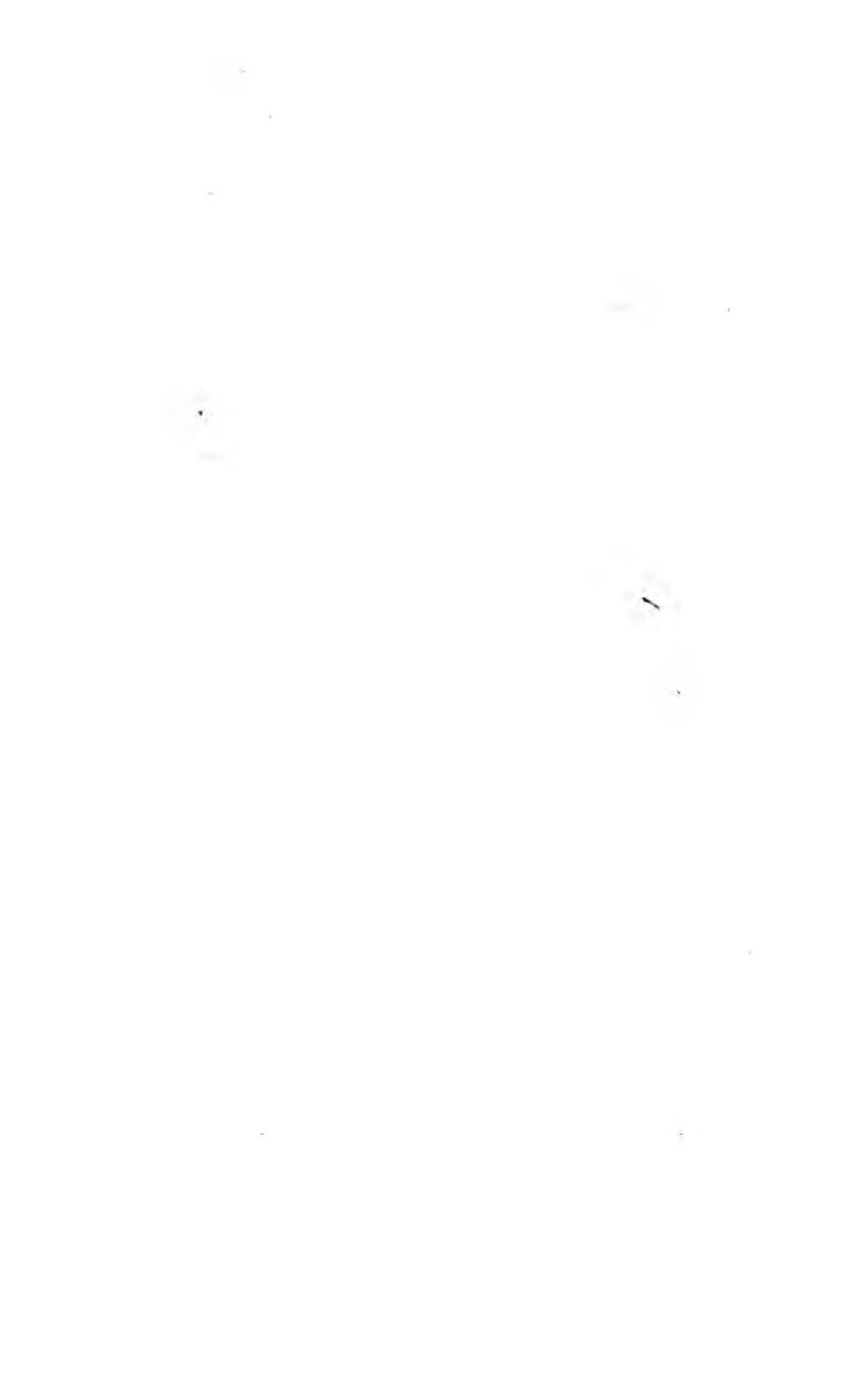
'Ah!' she shrieked at the boy, 'If you have spoiled my daughter, you must marry her . . . you wretch . . .' And she shrieked at Govind's mother for letting her son roam around like a bull. And Govind's mother shrieked at Govind's father for begetting a seducer. And Govind's father shouted at Govind. To which the boy returned the simple answer: 'Marry me to the girl.'

And, at last, on an auspicious day, discovered in the scrolls of their fate, for a good commission by Pandit Badri Nath, the brahmin priest, Govind and Gauri were married . . .

Desire . . .  
To  
Paint

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M. F. Husain



## Desire . . . To Paint



HER TWO DIMENSIONAL BODY, stark naked, lies flat on a tactile surface, like a piece of canvas virgin white, crying for wounds to be stabbed on her untouched desire, penetrating deep inside her womb. The fierce strokes of brush heavily loaded with sperm of colours, spectrum of light stretched tight on Kama's bow.

The shooting arrow like an 'Agni baan' sets ablaze the pores of her entire body. The piece of canvas turns into a woman, not two dimensional, she has already conceived the third-dimension in her womb, giving birth to unknown images. The very gesture of your hand, holding a brush, pressing and caressing the skin of modulated images is in itself an act of intimacy.

In the vast landscape of female anatomy, there is a white river valley ambushed in a sweet smell of saffron. Pink pinnacle of earth like a bubbling bosom. Encircling Padmanabhan in the centre. Red hot iguana crawling up her

thigh to enter the abode of ecstasy through the Dwarpalika's  
Mrignain.

The landscape is still wet. Don't put it up on the wall.  
Colours may drip.

For a long time the earth inside continues to experience  
tremors of spasm. The painter's brush slips from his hand and  
he falls flat on the ground two dimensional.

Sex  
in Indian  
Cinema:  
Only  
Bad People  
Do It

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Mahesh Bhatt



## Sex in Indian Cinema



IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1966. I WAS in the bloom of my youth. The film was a black and white thriller named *Kohra* (The Mist). As I watched the sexy adulterous wife of the protagonist willingly steal into the debauched arms of a lecherous antagonist, I was flooded with a pleasurable sensation of sin. It was way back then that it occurred to me that in Indian films only bad people have sex. Good people fall in love.

How can sex which is the fountainhead, the very seed of our birth be bad? Sex is a good part of life, not a bad part of life. If movies aim to reveal life, sex should be an ideal subject of movies, but it is not so. Sex is the only subject ignored by Indian cinema. Unless, of course, it is couched in the soothing familiarities of action-driven plots, love stories and mythologies. In India people have a split personality on the subject of sex. It has a place in books, in conversations on the booming foreign TV networks, but on our screens we pretend as if sex does not exist.

The twentieth century has seen the introduction of the birth control pill. Test-tube babies, artificial insemination, surrogate mothers and now Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Western cinema that twenty-five years ago was shouting 'free love' is now whispering 'abstinence is the safest sex'. The circle is more or less complete in that region of the world. But in India, a country which prides itself as the land of the free, things have more or less remained unchanged. Even now freedom of expression in cinema comes with the guaranteed remote control of the State.

The story of sex in Indian cinema is a difficult tale to tell. The root sense of the word 'essay' connotes exploration, an expedition into the unknown. A light feeling of apprehension begins to engulf me at the inception of this journey into the unknown. While one cannot go back to the dawn of the human race and ask the first caveman and cavewoman what their 'first time' felt like, it seems possible to peep into the cave of one's own mind and examine the evolution of sex and eroticism in Indian cinema in relation to one's own life.

There is a kinky world of images, recollections of a lifetime spent in cinema halls, soaked with emotions locked in the dark womb of the brain. This is 'memory-land', a kingdom of sight and sound, smell and tastes. So much of one's childhood lies buried here. The only way to navigate through this terrain is by using one's heart as some kind of a radar and letting go. Stepping into this domain makes the stomach churn and the hormones surge. An erotic tune resonates within me. Memories sail back through the sea of time. Ancient buried chords replay. '*Ha ha ho ho , la la la la la—jo tummmmm muskura dooooo . . .*' I'm thrown back—back in time.

I am sitting in a hushed cinema hall. There is a mingled smell of popcorn and me. A black and white film is being beamed on the rectangle of the screen. At this moment nothing exists. There is no other world but this. My throat feels parched.

My body blazes. The dominant emotions are of increased desires and expectations. I hold myself awake and savour the moment. This is where it all began for me. It was here in the dark paradise of the cinema hall that I, for the first time, had a foretaste of lust. It was here in the land of innocence, that I first experienced the tremors of manhood suddenly like an earthquake.

‘We have sinned,’ says the woman with her back to the camera.

‘Yes, we are criminals in the eyes of society,’ adds the man hiding his face in shame. They have just made love. Prior to the act, the couple sing a love song (a fragment of which I’ve quoted earlier), in the course of which they touch and fondle one another. Such love songs are to Indian cinema what foreplay is to coitus. But the real thing is made possible by a studio downpour and the library shots of lightning and thunder. In Indian cinema, making love in the rain is the done thing. H<sub>2</sub>O blended with the celestial flash, flash, bang, bang, works like an aphrodisiac for our otherwise moral couples of the Indian screen. The above sequence is from a film called, *Dhoot Ka Phool* (Blossom of Dust) directed by Yash Chopra in the late Fifties.

Memory of another song, ‘Roop tera mastana . . .’ the famous ‘one shot number’ filmed with Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore from *Aradhana*, a film directed by Shakti Samanta, in the early Seventies, drifts back through the decades. Both these films had a sequence of love-making after a heavenly cloudburst. The themes of both these films dealt with the severe repercussions of pre-marital sex. Both these films were box-office hits of their times.

All memories are not nice memories. So much of one’s unbearable youth remains submerged in the crevices of one’s brain cells. Remembrance is painful at times. Accidentally, I step on a repressed fragment of my childhood. This bubble of memory burns. It hurts.

It is an overcast rainy day. A friend and I are rambling towards an almond tree, tramping through waist-high, rain-soaked grass, buzzing with coloured dragonflies. There is a crowd clustered at a distance under the bathed almond tree. A policeman clad in a navy-blue uniform is trying to push the crowd back. There is something there on the patch of grass amidst those dead almond leaves. We inch closer, curious to find out what that something is. To our horror we discover it is an aborted, ant-eaten foetus. A sniggering, blunt voice in the crowd mutters, '*Dhool Ka Phool*'. The comparison was an obvious one in those times. In *Dhool Ka Phool* the leading lady abandons a child which is born out of wedlock fearing social outrage. The unknown mother of this decomposing embryo had done the same. Here was a strange case of life imitating art, or was it vice versa?

'If sex is right after marriage, it should be right before marriage. Why should society punish these people who have sex outside marriage? Why should people who do not conform to the prevalent moral codes of a society be made to feel like criminals? Every society is fascist in its nature. And our moral social codes are sadistic to the core,' I thought to myself, even then, way back in my childhood. Little did I know that years later I would pay a heavy price for stating the above views in my maiden film, *Manzilein aur bhi hain*. The film was banned for fourteen months by the Central Board of Film Censors. The film they said, tried to mock and subvert the sacred institution of marriage. The plot of this film revolved around an unusual sexual relationship between a prostitute and two criminals on the run. The film was a box-office disaster.

'You should not restrict this essay just to your memory,' said my wife, Soni, peeping over my shoulder. 'You must give the readers a much wider perspective on the subject. You forget that Indian cinema was born almost forty years before your birth.' Her matter-of-fact comment jerked me out of

'memory-land' and brought my mental process to a grinding halt. It's not comfortable to come face-to-face with the limitations of one's own memories. As the day wore on I found myself looking for another inlet into the unknown, hazy world of sex in Indian cinema. I needed new memories to widen the horizon of my subject.

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'We have material way back from 1913 but the paper is very old, it is crumbling. You will have to make a trip to the National Film Archives in Pune to read about sex in those bygone days. An interview with me over the phone will not serve your purpose. Let's meet and chat. We also have a large collection of films from the silent era. They should interest you. Do you know, during the British Raj, kissing was initially permitted in Indian films,' P. K. Nair laughingly concluded. P. K. Nair was the director of the National Film Archives. He is retired now. He is a great lover of films.

Next day, at the crack of dawn, I took off for Pune. As the tiny shaky Vayudoot aircraft soared into the clouds and flew towards its destination, I caught a glimpse of dawn breaking over the sleepy city of Bombay. The sight was rare. It set me thinking. I wondered what had happened over the years to change the Indian attitude towards sex so drastically. Wasn't this the country which had produced sensualists like Vatsyayana who wrote the *Kamasutra* in the years AD 200–400. Why was the kiss which was once permitted on the Indian screen done away with. Why? For what? By whom? When? These questions began to weigh on me. The answers to my queries I knew lay somewhere in Maykar Bhavan, Prabhat Road, Pune, in the National Film Archives.

Darkness at dawn. There is a power failure here in the National Film Archives. 'You should not have come here on a

Thursday, they have load-shedding every week in Pune. These power breakdowns are bad for our film vaults. They make the temperature fluctuate and that's disastrous for our old films. Why don't you go to the library and wait for me. I will join you soon. Meanwhile you can browse through some old books and magazines. You might stumble on something interesting. I will arrange the screening of some old films. They should give you a clearer picture of the attitude of our film makers towards sex in those bygone days,' said Nair, as we spiralled down a squeaky wooden staircase.

Along the cold dim hallway of the Archives, faded portraits of our forebears from the film world are framed on wooden boards. They seem to whisper something to the living. Nothing lasts. The world will silence you soon enough. At the end of it all you are just a picture on the wall. What a life! A giant blow-up of Madhubala, the glamour queen of the Fifties who was called the Greta Garbo of the Indian Film Industry, smiles at me at the entrance of a massive film library. Childhood memories of this screen goddess reeling under an inexplicable spasm of laughter on a film set just before the takes, flicker in my mind. '*Pyar kiya to darna kaya . . .*' that famous love song of rebellion sung by Anarkali in the court of Emperor Akbar under the intoxicating influence of increased levels of estrogen in her body, echoes in my memory. The film was *Mughal-e-Azam*, directed by K. Asif in the late Sixties. I'm also reminded of that memorable scene from the same film which was shot in extreme close-ups of just faces in which Dilip Kumar tickles the impassioned face of Madhubala with a white feather. That was perhaps the most sensitively portrayed erotic scene on the Indian screen. That was thirty years ago. This scene still continues to titillate thousands of cinegoers all over the world. I guess that when it comes to the basic instincts of life, we feel much the same way our forefathers did and our children will.

Sitting down here in a hushed corner of this library, amidst

a pile of books, I leaf through some extra-large age-old editions of film magazines. An article written by Kidar Sharma, the iconoclast film director of the Forties, springs out of the withering pages of an issue of *Filmfare* dated 8 August 1952. The reproduction of this study is most relevant in this context, particularly since it originates from the mind of a film maker who made great films like *Jogan* and *Chitralekha*.

The essay: "Cupid directs the film" by Kidar Sharma.

I would divide directors into the three following categories according to their conception of a female lover:

First and foremost of the three is the 'Peeping Tom' category. The director in this group 'sees' through the key-hole of his mind and copies on the screen whatever he 'sees'. He is likely to be a person who will choose a foreign conception of love, that depicted by Western films, and translate it to the Indian screen. He is the man who with a Westernised magic wand transforms our Radhas into Rita Hayworths . . . . Unfortunately, an overwhelming majority of Indian directors belong to this category, with the result that most of the love-scenes in Indian films appear unnatural and at variance with the Indian way of life.

Into the second category fall the sensible directors who seek the characterisation of the 'principal woman' from within their own society and, invariably, from within their own family. Their heroines are often a portrayal of their own sisters-in-law or, more often, their own wives, or even of the girl they love. This class of directors draw

upon past tradition and the present-day life of India for their inspiration. Theirs is the healthiest attitude towards the presentation of love on the screen . . . .

In the other sub-group come the directors with more poetic and less realistic conceptions of screen love. All the six best directors of the Indian screen, including veterans like Debaki Bose, Shantaram and others, come into this category. Some of them are good, some are bad poets. The poetic directors draw freely upon symbolism to express themselves. They also have at hand an inexhaustible literature on the subject. Indian books on '*Shringar Ras*' provide a veritable store-house of knowledge on the poetic expression of love. However much one may differ from their basic attitude towards screen love, one has to admit that quite often the 'poetic' directors lift it to sublime heights and make their heroines look like divine creatures, as in *Jogan* and *Ratnadeep*.

The third and the last category, and one representing the latest trend in screen love-making, can very accurately be described as the director with the Cave Man conception of love. This is the technique made vivid on the Indian screen mostly by Raj Kapoor and other film artistes graduating from the Prithvi Theatres. Fortunately or unfortunately it has become a craze with the younger generation of artistes and directors. To a certain extent, it is a different approach to love. Here love is symbolised by a series of acrobatics causing physical pain to the 'principal woman'. This group of people believes that tears of love can be made to flow from a woman's eyes if she is manhandled.

The story of sex in Indian cinema is incomplete without the mention of this 'caveman'. Raj Kapoor was an audacious, courageous film maker, who displayed the feverish carnality of a schoolboy in most of his films. This extraordinary film maker blazed through the dim skies of our world of entertainment from the late Forties upto the Eighties. His films set the hearts of cinegoers in the Indian subcontinent aflame. Every release of his was a national event. Raj Kapoor was a trail-blazer, a pathfinder who opened up new possibilities, new territories, new continents for other film makers to follow.

Unlike the Indian film puritan who usually plants every hedonistic activity imaginable on to his villains and vamps and superimposes pious designs on all vices of mankind, Raj Kapoor explored the passionate side of the hero-heroine relationship unashamedly. He infused a burning brand into the forced romantic cliché of the Indian screen. Raj Kapoor's love scenes with Nargis had a blend of romantic fantasy and real passion. '*Pyar hua ikrar hua*', from *Shree 420* (1955) '*Barsaat mein humse mile tum*', from *Barsaat* (1949), '*Ghar aaya mera pardesi*', from *Awara* (1951), '*Jago Mohan pyare*', from *Jagte Raho* (1956) are the few familiar sounds which drift back from the synapses bringing along with it the bathed radiance of childhood.

I turn the kaleidoscope of time to my adolescence. Unremembered images of love and passion from various R. K. Films, emerge. They are enmeshed with forgotten melodies. I am reminded of '*Main kya karoon Ram mujko budha mil gaya*', a naughty number from Raj Kapoor's *magnum opus*, *Sangam*, in which the Indian bride on her honeymoon, play-acts like a whore taunting and questioning her husband's virility in a Parisian suite. '*Bol Radha bol sangam hoga ke nahin*', a smash hit song from the same film, triggers off memories of a beautiful woman in a picturesque

setting dressed in a red swimsuit. The woman was Vyajantimala. During the course of this number Raj Kapoor, clad in shorts, hangs from a tree with a bagpipe under one arm and begs his beloved 'Radha' for an orgasmic release.

Over the centuries for an Indian, or to be more precise a Hindu, the liaison between Radha and Krishna and other Hindu gods and goddesses—Shiva and Parvati, Rama and Sita have been portrayed in paintings and expressed in vocal Indian classical music. With the advent of cinema the trend shifted to mythological films. The sensations and feelings evoked by images of gods and goddesses in amorous embrace have been titillating the nation on a subliminal level for decades. In this country, where most of the people still choose to see movies that deal with wish-fulfilment and fantasies, these mythological films have a therapeutic effect on the minds of those cinegoing audiences whose greatest moments of passion and happiness in the cinema halls are usually undercut with a profound sense of guilt while watching sex scenes between ordinary mortals.

'I show romance on the screen, not naked sex. You make more money that way. The Indian is very traditional. He doesn't want to own up to himself that he has an insatiable appetite for sex on the screen. The Indian male wants his woman to be a virgin who behaves like a whore,' said one of the most underrated directors of our times, Raj Khosla. '*Hum behudi mein tum*' a song from *Kala Pani*, in which a veiled prostitute unleashes her charm on the drunken hero, is a typical example of a Raj Khosla song and his unique attitude towards sex on the Indian screen.

'*Zamana ye samjha ki hum peeke aye*' from *Anarkali*, a song picturized on the ravishing Beena Rai, flagged off the trend of showing drunken women letting their hair down under the evil influence of alcohol. Years later in the early Seventies, R. K. Nayyar shot a hot number, '*Kaise rahun chup*', for

*Inteqquam*, in which Sadhana, a superstar of the Sixties, goes berserk in a party after getting drunk.

*Because of Eve*, a sex-educational film released in the Fifties, created havoc at the box office. The success of this film prompted the Indian film maker to come up with his own indigenous sex-educational films. The *Gupt Gyan* series made by B. K. Adarsh, became big box-office hits in our sex-starved country. Some film makers imported 16mm medical films on sex education and intercut the shots of the white nude bodies and genitals with native Indian faces. Today, in this era of VCRs we are much better off than our predecessors. To satiate our appetite for nude bodies, all we have to do is to walk down to the closest video library and get our choice of hard or soft core porn films for just ten or twenty rupees.

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The evolution of sex in Indian cinema has been gradual but constant. All over the world sex sells. It moves products. It always has and always will. We as consumers have evolved to a point where we need more and as the world gets darker our fantasies also get darker. A film like *Basic Instinct* with its ice-pick wielding nympho brings in over 100 million dollars at the box office. Here in India my own film *Sadak*, which dealt with the seamier side of life and portrayed a eunuch who rules a red-light area went on to shatter major box-office records after a headlong battle with the Central Board of Film Certification in the year 1991.

In the year 1990, my film *Aashiqui*, which had a silhouetted shot of the hero and heroine kissing, was deleted by fifty per cent by the examining committee of the Central Board of Film Censors. All my attempts to make the chairman of the Censor Board see the absurdity of such a deletion failed. In the year 1978, I remember another famous Raj Kapoor film,

*Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, which sparked off a scandal all over India and created a national debate over censorship. The reason was that the film depicted several kisses between a man and his wife.

Camille Paglia, the controversial author of *The Sexual Personae*, a 718-page treatise on the history of art and sexuality says, 'The greatest periods of pornography are often those when there is overt sexual repression in society.' The Victorian era is one of pornography's richest period. Here in India our film makers have been resorting to various veiled methods to pack a good dose of sex in their films.

Talking about basic instincts, one wonders if the kiss is an instinct or a socio-cultural habit? They say that the kiss does not exist in China or among primitive people. Here in India, kissing in the Western sense is found on the temple sculpture of the Chitragupta temple, Khajuraho.

'If you scan these pages of the history of Indian cinema you will discover that the kiss was accepted by our audiences for twenty years, in silent and early talkies films,' said P.K. Nair, as he joined me in a dark corner of the film library. Putting away the book I was reading I quietly switched on my voice-activated tape recorder. 'Go on,' I said. He smiled and settled down, ready for a long conversation.

'In the early Forties, the nation's fight for freedom had reached its peak. The Indian film maker, to promote a feeling of solidarity amongst the Indian masses exercised self-restraint and did away with the kiss on the screen. The reason was simple. The kiss was viewed by the Indian native as a Western import. Showing an Indian character kiss on the Indian screen implied that he had succumbed to the evil cultural influences of the West. It was way back in those days that the Indian film maker began to use non-Hindu and non-Muslim names for the villains and vamps he portrayed in his films. The West was evil. Our film makers superimposed all the evil traits like smoking, drinking and having sex on characters he called

“Robert” or “Julie”. These characters wore sharkskin suits and low-necked dresses. The maxim that the villain can lay anybody he wants, have as much fun as he wants, cheat, steal, get rich, beat his servant etc., but get shot in the end, was perhaps also an invention of those times. Compensating moral values forced film makers to balance all serious departures from the social norm with actions or voices to condemn them. The Indian film hero and heroine had to be virgins. They were an embodiment of Rama and Sita,’ Nair quipped.

The soft echoes of our voices filled the dark spaces of the hallway. In the quiet monsoon light, as I watched my tape recorder roll, I was propelled into the infancy of Indian cinema, accompanied by the rhythmic tappings of the rain on the window panes, mesmerized by this voice that knew the history of Indian cinema like his own family album.

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It all began with Dada Saheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema. The year was 1913. The film was *Raja Harishchandra*. It had a famous bathing sequence which, according to P.K. Nair, was the most erotic scene shot in those early days. The amazing thing about this sequence was that all the women characters who participated in this bathing scene were not women but men masquerading as women. In those times, Indian women did not act in films. It was a cultural taboo. All the female parts were played by men, foreigners, Jews or Anglo-Indians. Percy Smith and Rene Smith, the two Anglo-Indian sisters, made a name for themselves as stars in the 1920s. *Throw of Dice*, a famous film made in 1929, had one of these Smith sisters as its leading lady. This film had lots of kisses.

There was also a passionate kiss in *Dil-e-Jigar*, a film based on a folklore. The film even had an English title called *Gallant Hearts*. The leading lady of this film was Lalita Pawar.

The memories of sex in the Indian cinema when replayed have the reverberations of the works of film directors like P. C. Barua, V. Shantaram, Debaki Bose, Nandlal Jaswant Lal, Kidar Sharma, Jayant Desai, Vijay Bhatt, Sohrab Modi and actors and actresses like Master Vinayak, Nazeem, Khurshid, Suraiya, Sulochana (Ruby Myers), Ramola, Mehtab, Devika Rani, Gohar, Ashok Kumar, Kanan Bala and a few others.

Kidar Sharma had the audacity to shoot a bathing sequence in his film *Chitralekha* in the early Forties. The leading lady of this film was Mehtab.

The swimming costume soon made its way on to the Indian screen but not with Nargis in Raj Kapoor's *Awara* in 1950 as is popularly believed. It was in Master Vinayak's *Brahmachari* in which Meenakshi first wore a swimsuit.

Sohrab Modi dared to tackle the theme of incest in the early Thirties in a film titled *Bharosa*.

The theme of sexual impotence was handled with great finesse by V. Shantaram in a film called *Duniya na mane*.

P. C. Barua's *Mukti*, a film made in the late Thirties, dealt with the theme of adultery. There is an erotic scene in this film in which a housewife during the course of a song, blatantly tries to seduce her husband's best friend while the husband is away. Watching this scene shattered all my claims of being permissive.

The tape in my tape recorder was running out on me. Suddenly there were lights. 'Why don't you go and watch some films now? I will meet you after lunch,' said P.K. Nair as we rode down the elevator heading towards the moviola. I spent the entire afternoon watching film after film. The end of my journey was close. In the evening, as I flew back home, I felt that some important questions had suddenly been resolved within me. I had no idea, though, what those questions were. But the answers were already being formed in my head.

As the last trace of sunlight vanished from the sky, and the aircraft began its descent into the city of Bombay, I was

reminded of P. K. Nair's curtain lines. 'I would rather go back to those days of my youth and get jolted by the sight of Nargis in a swimsuit than put on a mask and pretend to the world and to myself of being unmoved by those repulsive shots of blades in the vagina.' Nair was referring to Denis O'Rourke's controversial film on the life of a Bangkok call-girl called *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. There was a stab of nostalgia in his voice.

The next day, on a massive set of a Hong Kong prison, I was shooting a jail break sequence for my film *Gumraah*. In this Sunjay Dutt, who plays an obsessive lover of Sridevi, risks his life to rescue his lady love from the firing squad. Intercut with the main sequence is a tantalizing love-making scene between an evil 'foreign' jail warden and his female counterpart, played by Bob Cristo and Kunika.

As the lights on the sets were switched on one by one, an unusual kind of an excitement thundered through the silence. 'Action,' I screamed. Bob's rough hands slowly reached forward to touch Kunika's smooth white curves. As Kunika greedily reached forward to unbutton Bob's shirt, the curves of her naked back and shoulders glistened in the blue tungsten studio lights. Their sweaty bodies bunched together in a frenzy and fell on the prison floor . . . .

With stunning clarity I suddenly realized that I was no longer the person I had once been. Over the years I had slowly walked away from myself and that unafraid young man who had passionately expressed his views on sex being a good part of life and not a bad part of life in *Manzilein aur bhi hain*, way back in the year 1973.

I had cut myself, pruned myself to fit into this world in which everybody uses sex to market his wares and yet in the very same breath condemns it. I too was peddling the same maxim I had once found absurd which is that in Indian cinema only bad people have sex, good people fall in love.



A  
Perfect  
Pair of  
Breasts

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Frank Simoes



# A Perfect Pair of Breasts



IN THE SUMMER OF SIXTY-THREE, merriment ran high in the creative group in the British advertising agency, S. H. Benson in Bombay. I had been summoned by the account director, a Brit, who looked after the Maidenform bra account (it was always open season on junior copy-writers, the lowest form of animal life in the advertising jungle, and I was fair game).

'I need a perfect pair of breasts,' he said, 'get a ripple on and don't return without them.'

When I reported back to the creative department, the joy was unconfined. Helpful suggestions regarding colour, weight, shape and size flew about the room. Ribald mirth greeted each sally.

'Do your homework,' the lady copy chief said, 'check out their diet. Does *asli ghee* help? Will fish make a difference?'

'Resist the urge to handle the merchandise,' the art director chortled.

A female copywriter, who had just recently spurned my offer of coffee and other illicit pleasures at Bombelli, our favourite watering hole, bowdlerized the famous slogan, 'Frank dreamt he had the perfect pair of breasts in a Maidenform bra . . .'

The office fell about with merry laughter. The creative director—another expat—had the last word, 'Don't just stand there salivating,' he said, 'get on with it.'

I got on with it.

Bhagwan Wadhwani, the chairman of the company which had the exclusive Indian franchise for Maidenform bras, Jockey underwear, Jantzen swimwear and Liberty shirts, was a boisterous, unrestrained child of nature. A Sindhi with an Italian accent (he had spent fifteen years in the rag trade in Milan), he looked and dressed like the mafia don, Lucky Luciano, in the Thirties, seriously lethal, impeccably dapper, and as far as his competitors were concerned, this was no coincidence. A freebooter in a fat, complacent market-place, and entirely unencumbered by the petty constraints which afflicted lesser mortals (the finer points of ethics, for instance) he had gone through the moribund Indian industry like a hungry shark in a school of mullet, leaving desolation and bankruptcy in his wake. In five short years, all of his brands were market leaders by long margins. His advertising budget was among the top five in our roster of clients. His eye for detail was legendary (he would stalk the quality control lines, taking random counts of the number of stitches in an inch of collar with a magnifying glass), and while he believed that sex made babies, this was purely incidental to its real purpose: selling his merchandise.

Dozens of copywriters and directors had come to grief grappling with the metaphysics of the carnal shirt: how did you make a collar sexy; invest bedroom ardour into the cut of a cuff; evoke priapic ebullience out of checks, stripes and

textures? A month earlier, he had turned down the latest batch of advertising concepts for Liberty shirts because ‘they wouldn’t make a rabbit rut!’ Management—seeking a breather—decided that a little blood on the floor would distract the beast: I was thrown to the lion. A briefing session was arranged and I was ordered to bone up on shirts. I had never met Wadhwani. Inspired as much by fear and trembling as any desire to learn, I waded through reams of arcane data on fibre composition and Japanese interlinings; the geometry of fabric and fall, texture and weave; the intricacies of fusebonding and the clever little double-stich; and memorized Liberty’s full range of colour, pattern and design. The midnight oil burned; my eyes glazed; sex? Did any such thing exist? Memory and desire fled, in inverse proportion to each new revelation of the art and craft of shirt-making. Was this the stuff of tickle and romp?

When I presented myself, Wadhwani looked at me with utter disbelief.

‘Who are you?’

I told him.

‘What do you know about shirts?’ he asked.

That was easy; I went on at length.

‘Bullshit!’ A gallows-at-dawn silence descended on the room. ‘Guys wear fancy shirts because they want to sleep with fancy girls. Just like you and me. Now go back and write a campaign.’

Being scared witless helped. I wrote five advertisements in two days. Here, without apology, is the first:

*It was the stuff of dreams*

*Warm sensuous dreams*

*Heavenly lemon stripes. Close, intimate . . .*

*A space the width of her tiniest finger  
kept them apart*

*And a single, darling, downy, lilac stripe  
yearning to be stroked*  
*She was barely able to contain herself*  
*Oh well, she thought, with a happy sigh. . . .*  
*'Tinker,' she said, 'Tailor.'*  
*Another button, 'Soldier, Sailor'*  
*Each syllable soft as a kiss.*  
*'Rich man, poor man, beggar man . . . '*  
*Inspiration failed. Happy chaos took its place.*  
*'Oops, darling,' she chuckled, 'no more buttons.'*  
*His shirt slopped to the floor.*  
*Was that any way to treat a Liberty shirt?*

All of this nonsense was superimposed in  $\text{\o}$  12 pt. Baskerville Serif on a picture shot in caressing half-light: a woman's slim, elegant hand (no wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am here; this was class!) unbuttoning a shirt. The man's face is hidden in shadow: the line of cheek and jaw will brook no denial: it is resonant! Eyes downcast (it was, after all, the early Sixties) she rests her head lightly on his shoulder, a swathe of thick, black hair curves softly down her cheek; an inscrutable Giacinda smile plays about her lips. This is one naughty lady . . .

Without a word, I laid all five advertisements on the table before Wadhwani. A huge feral grin lit his eyes (Luciano, 'Take that you rat!'). He said, 'Great, run them.'

We did so, with some misgivings, but in the event Bhagwan Wadhwani proved right: you could never go broke by overestimating the sexual repression of the Indian male.

That season sales of Liberty shirts doubled and the advertising concept, with variations, was to run for three years.

Sex in the Sixties in India was the stuff of dreams for a virtual majority of young Indians. The mandatory condom in wallet (bought surreptitiously, like pornography, in plain wrapper) was pure fudge, regretful nostalgia for an act eagerly read about, lusted over, fantasized in solitary, sweaty guilt, in the wee hours, lied about with liplicking invention, rarely ever dared. The truth was sadly prosaic: the average Indian male, healthily endowed but woefully unrequited, would never be a conquering hero to his member.

At about the same time in the United States, a great act of cultural insemination was to change sexual, musical and drug mores forever. A flower child placing a lily in the barrel of a national guardsman's rifle—in a classic confrontation between the anarchic, establishmentarian bullet and universal love and peace—became the visual icon of the times. 'Make love not war' was emblazoned on a million T-shirts. When Timothy O'Leary, full-tenured Harvard professor and guru to the LSD generation, exhorted his followers to 'Turn on, tune in, drop out!' and tens of thousands did the Beatles, icons in their own right, and Mozart to the new movement, celebrated the drug culture with a song, "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds". Everything was free: nature, sex, love, friendship, a Pandora's cornucopia of recreational hallucinogens. The flower child roamed God's earth and found it to be good. When the fellowship of the chosen extended the hand of friendship, they did not break bread; they shared a joint.

It would take years before this tectonic change would find a full seismic response in India. Some of the flotsam and jetsam, drop-outs even from that forgiving culture—hallowed by the word 'hippie' before it became an epithet—began settling along the more salubrious and sympathetic beaches of India's southern coastline. Hints and portents of the renaissance emerged in the unlikeliest of places. I remember Kabir Bedi (then a young film executive with us) and I listening

to a pirated tape of the musical *Hair* during office hours (sacrilege!) in enthralled silence, as we would, over the years, to Bob Dylan and the Beatles. The literature was, if anything, even more soul-stirring than the music: Jack Kerouac led the pack with *The Dharma Bums*. Ginsberg's apocalyptic elegies limned the new American Dream; tattered copies of Corso and William Burroughs became part of the compulsory, underground curricula at Xavier's and Stephen's, indeed, wherever young Westernized Indians sought the new freedom.

Yet, for the main part, it was an age of touching sexual innocence. I remember vividly the trauma in our very Catholic family when my youngest sister, all of fifteen, went to church one Sunday in a sleeveless, breezy summer dress. It took six severe novenas, and as many weeks of ostracized penitence, to remove the stigma of the Scarlet Women. She carries the psychic scar to this day. One morning, Kabir (who had begun a highly visible relationship with Protima Gupta, who had yet to streak starkers across the nation's tabloids and into its psyche) asked my secretary for an appointment, a strangely formal request between good friends. He came into my office, hugely embarrassed; it sat awkwardly on a personality which was, even then, larger than life. 'If Protima and I,' he said, carefully measuring his words, 'live together, will the management object?'

Not as paranoid a notion as it might appear today. We were employed by the oldest and largest British advertising agency in the world: top management was white and pukka: a tie and jacket to the office were compulsory (we were allowed to sling the latter over the shoulder or the arm when getting to work; but the jacket was *de rigueur* at client meetings). I did not say, bless you, my lad, proceed as you will, knowing they would regardless, but made light of it. For that day and age, it was an act of courage. Normal, heterosexual sex was fettered with medieval chastity belts and locked away in dark, musty closets. As for the love which dare not speak its name, nobody

did. Dost thou art, and dost thou will remain, was an idea thirty years short of its time.

But Wadhwani was unfazed. He believed that breasts were big business, and after my debut with the Liberty shirt campaign, he chuckled whenever we met. Now he waved bra after bra before my nose, while providing a running commentary, ‘This is an illusion. It makes a thirty-two look like a thirty-six, and no one notices the padding. Look at this plunging V-shape. You would never believe she had one on. Now, here’s my favourite. Sheer, almost transparent,’ and he stretched and held it up to the light—‘the nipple comes into its own.’ Not a hint of the prurient; he could have been extolling the merits of haulage trucks. He went into a thoughtful silence, then his eyebrows shot up. (‘Dis is one offer, pal, you don’t refuse!’)

He said, ‘Gina!'

I hadn’t a clue. I smiled with complete understanding and warm, unqualified approval.

Wadhwani scowled. (‘You know from nothin’, kid!’), then sighed, produced an American film magazine, and tossed it to me. ‘Lollobrigida,’ he said, ‘that’s what I call perfect bosoms.’

Where, I wondered, did she keep the other pair? But he had a point (or two). I had seen pictures of La Lolla before, in careless *déshabillé*, and had become an instant convert to her cause. No question about it, Bhagwan Wadhwani knew his bosoms. Now all I had to do was find the perfect pair. Word spread like wildfire in the modelling agencies and while we were not permitted to view the goods, *au naturel*, hundreds of pictures of all manner of bosoms (female optimism at its sunniest, more often than not in the face of dire evidence to the contrary) clad in the sheerest of bikini tops, deluged the agency. Never in the annals of the company’s history, observed our Welsh managing director, had so many senior executives

dropped all to serve one client's (chuckle) pressing needs.

When we found her, the search was well worth the effort: Lise Jones, a lovely Anglo-Indian model, with the face of a renaissance angel and a body made for sin. Wadhwani grinned. Lit a cigar. ('I gotta hand it to you, kid.') The eyebrows wiggled. 'Wonderful bosoms!'

It would be nice to record an advertising triumph as grand as the Liberty shirt campaign, but while the advertisements looked gorgeous, this was still India mid-Sixties, and I shouldn't have been surprised by the letter which arrived from a leading newspaper group, rejecting the campaign, ' . . . the lighting, the camera angles, the poses, indeed the very purpose of the pictures, seem to be to excite the prurient reader. They draw attention to the bosoms [not again!] of the female model and underplay the garment being advertised. In fact, in one of the pictures, she appears to have nothing on at all.' So much for Maidenform's tribute to the nipple. We offered a compromise. The air-brush was ruthlessly employed. Curves, voluptuous in their sweep and promises, shrank visibly overnight; cleavages assumed a chagrined modesty; you could now count the stitches to the inch in a bra which could have been put together from plaster of Paris. The campaign was resubmitted for release, and returned yet again, for the unkindest cut of all. This was performed with due solemnity and India's nippleless pair of bosoms in a Maidenform bra made a somewhat diminished debut in the Indian press.

Lise Jones was not amused.

But the times they were a-changing. Breasts grew nipples again in the Seventies and became a cause celebre in hearths and homes across the land. A young east Indian, Ross Deas (of subsequent Ross-Morarka conglomerate fame) must take responsibility for the renaissance of the Indian bosom. Chaffing at the bit in a large transnational, his entrepreneurial instincts in danger of atrophy by neglect, Ross resigned,

scraped up a bit of capital and plunged—with an optimism unsullied by experience into the cut-and-thrust of the mail order business, then in its unregulated infancy in India. Swift success in making men's muscles bigger and better with a spring contraption encouraged him to seek fresh horizons, and he brought manic energy and evangelical fervour to the uplift of the Indian bosom. What biceps were to beefcake, he reasoned, the bosom was to Bansriben. Thus did Archimedes exclaim, 'Eureka!' in his bath. Then, as now, Ross does not allow grass to grow underfoot. He designed an ingenious, pliable, metal-and-spring device (no mincing words, he called it 'the bust developer'; unkind observers called it 'the booby trap') which would have made a Spanish Inquisitor proud. A mechanical engineer and a physiotherapist assisted in its creation. Strenuous effort was required to exercise with the gadget, pulling and releasing it, hither and thither, at various contortionist angles. And while it needed will power and a high pain threshold to make its wonders work, Ross's trials, conducted in the strictest secrecy, showed that it did.

'You can't have profit without pain,' Ross declared, and quickly went about persuading the Indian woman that her breasts had a future. It is unlikely that Ross, whose sense of urgency does not allow for non-essentials, would have drawn up a check-list of emotional pressure points for the advertising, but if he had, it would have read something like this :

### ***Most Important***

- Fear and self-loathing
- Before and after
- Sexual jealousy
- Sexual gratification
- Instant male arousal in strangers

### ***Less Important***

- Beauty
- Happiness
- Peer status

### ***Avoid at all costs***

- Rational argument

The campaign broke with the ‘before-and-after’ theme, flagged with such attention-grabbers as ‘Brand New’, ‘Never Before’, ‘First Time in India’ and suchlike. And if the ‘before’ picture evoked pity if not downright sorrow, the results of six weeks’ early morning work with the bust developer prompted awe, a touch of disbelief, a rush of emotion: Gosh . . . would it really? . . . could it be true? . . . should I? . . . no one will ever know. A masterstroke, that last little nudge. The anonymity of a money order and a couple in the mail; the discretion of a postal delivery in a plain wrapper; the measuring tape in blushing pink to chart progress (Ross never missed a trick); and forever after, a smile on the lips, a song in the heart, and a size 36B. Not forgetting, as Ross was quick to bring to the attention of his audience in later advertisements, the husband who never strayed again, and even if he did, did it matter? With such a frolic of panting fish waiting to be fried? The sad/happy plight of those unfortunate friends who would never discover Ross’s gift to womankind; the joy every morning in the bath, ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall, tell me . . .’

Whenever I am asked the asinine question, ‘Does advertising work?’ I am reminded of the bust developer. Thousands of women—from cities as light years apart as Bombay and Bhusawal—rushed to mail their money orders, a resounding testament to the triumph of hope over reason. Ross became richer by the day and went on to the fatter, infinitely

more fertile pastures of the money markets, where he proved, yet again, that money does grow on trees if you know where to look.

If anyone in Indian advertising can lay claim to taking sex by the horn (in a manner of speaking) one need look no further than Kersey Katrak—currently, in the early autumn of a controversial and explosive career—executive creative director of the mega-agency, Lintas. He came to the industry's nervous attention in the early Sixties, a disquieting presence, an itch that refused to go away. He wore the lean, hungry, bearded look long before it became a fashionable cliché. Copywriting and theatrical star, embryonic playwright, mean and gifted poet, pretender to the higher metaphysical truths, he blazed a trail through three agencies, a rite of passage littered with the debris of executives who dared challenge his talent, and creatives of lesser breeds without his law. He would come to no good, they said, but when he set up his own agency, Marketing and Mass Communications (MCM), the doomsayers were scattered like so much chaff. It was brilliantly original, pathologically aggressive and unflinchingly successful. We all knew that Katrak would seize the world and make it his own, younger by far than Alexander the Great.

To Katrak and a handful of young, anarchic, iconoclastic copywriters (in MCM and a few other agencies), whose motto could well have been 'Who dares, wins!', must go the credit for the coming of age of sex in Indian advertising. They created a seminal shift in the existing paradigm. Ivan Arthur, creative director of Hindustan Thomson Associates (HTA), India's oldest and largest advertising agency, calls the movement, 'the first wave':

The wave was an exhilarating one. Every day we opened the newspapers to look for breakthroughs, and we found them—in the advertising produced by

Da Cunha, MCM and Frank Simoes, campaigns which pointed the way to the future.

This First Wave was like an explosion; it shattered old ideas and attitudes . . . It introduced style, surprise, aesthetics, stimulation, sophistication and guts into the advertising itself and it revolutionised attitudes, interactions and styles of operation.

Who would have thought that one of the earliest harbingers of sexual upheaval in advertising would emerge, priapic and triumphant, from a bottle of orange pop? (Katrak and his art director, Panna Jain, natch!) Today, the Gold Spot campaign, conceived by MCM in the Seventies, may seem about as sexually explicit as the Yellow Pages but, for the time, it was revolutionary. Up to that watershed, a soft drink was an ice-cold, flavoured thirst-quencher for a hot day, and promoted exclusively as such. Why then, reasoned Katrak and Jain, in an inspired flight of intuition, was the bottle shaped like a phallus in coital frenzy? And why were young couples sipping from two straws out of a single bottle? Soon, under their wily and subversive ministrations, Gold Spot was the only encouragement a couple needed to hop into bed. The slogan did not quibble: 'Live a little hot . . . sip a Gold Spot.' But, variety, as we all know, is the spice of sexual life and two years later, Gold Spot urged the young to 'Get a taste of something fresh', leaving no room for confusion: there they are, a young and handsome couple, but all is not well. She is sad and wistful; he is bored and nearly out of it, until he notices—at propositioning distance—the Other Woman: they exchange a glance of shimmering incandescence, reminding us that earlier flames, extinguished, may always be rekindled. 'Livva little hot . . .' RIP.

Ten years on, Trikaya Grey, a new hot shop, would have none of this waftling. An Amazonian bondage queen is

surrounded by three muscular fawning males. The slogan cracks a whip, ‘Don’t just think about it, don’t just talk about it, Do it!’ ‘Do it’, as you will have guessed, was a low-calorie coke. The campaign was a runaway success.

Will somebody please tell me how sex in advertising works?

The decade was to see the full flowering of sex as a legitimate means of advertising expression, from the first nude in Indian advertising (Nivea cream with—surprise, surprise—Lise Jones) to the rose-tinted romantic ideal (the Charms cigarette campaign). There were more blatant offerings. How Wadhwani would have warmed to the hero of the Frenchie underwear advertisement: hung like a water-buffalo, starkers, except for a pair of Frenchies two sizes too small, delivering a Karate strike to an innocent passer-by in a suit (suit? Serves the sod right!), while a nubile young thing looks on adoringly.

A bench-mark of the Eighties was the launch of a new, raunchy magazine, *Debonair*. I had a chat with Vinod Mehta, founder-editor, when the magazine was still a gleam in his eager little eye. He had promises to keep, he said; in the event, *Debonair* lived up to them splendidly. If one were to measure the potency of a publication by the loyalty of its readership, no other magazine has occupied a niche with such established success. *Debonair* was a refreshingly catholic exploration of the life and times of the contemporary Indian male. Sartre rubbed shoulders, so to speak, with the delectable Lolita Singh (who disrobed with disarming candour and beguiling coquetry); Farrukh Dhondy told it like it was in dear old Blighty; Avid kept a wicked tongue firmly in his cheek, while, on invitation, the brighter talents in Indian journalism held forth. Vinod kept his red pencil firmly in check. *Debonair* made no bones about the fact that the affairs of the mind and the liveliness of the prostrate were delightfully compatible.

Fifteen years earlier, an attempt at a similar magazine for

men folded up in six months for lack of advertising support. *Debonair* marked a threshold in the sexual emancipation of the Indian advertiser. The future had arrived. The condom manufacturers were ecstatic; here, at last, was the perfectly 'cost-effective' medium. No wastage. Every reader was a potential customer. They leaped—at times with disastrous results—on the *Debonair* bandwagon. One such abortive attempt offered a condom of a different colour—from fire-engine red to pulse-racing purple—for every day of the week. There were five advertisements, each in living colour, as the blurbs say, and they were (quite unwittingly) hilarious. The visual of the first advertisement had a young couple on a swing, at its apogee, awkwardly balanced, and in imminent danger of grave injury. A contributor to the *Indian Post* (a new daily in Bombay—brash, irreverent and lively—edited by Vinod Mehta who had moved from *Debonair*) took the campaign apart in a satire titled, 'The Last of the Red Hot Condoms'. I quote, italicizing the advertising copy.

*It was Monday.* A good beginning. Quiet. Accurate. You just can't go wrong with Monday, it comes around like clockwork every seven days of the week. *I found her far away and aloof.* Stop goofing off, you twit. Pictures never lie. There they are, both on one swing. She's sitting on it. He's standing behind her. The lower six digits of her spine are pressed against his right shin bone. Her left hand rests menacingly on the big blood vessel of his right thigh (a karate killing spot and from her expression, she knows it). He is bent at the knees, clutching for dear life at the ropes. Quivering. Who wouldn't be? His anguished smile tells us at once that he expects a hernia. Her face, a black study in unholy joy, tells us it will happen in a minute or two. *It was time to turn on the*

*cold hauteur*. Clearly the work of a printer's devil. Cold water is what the copywriter meant, surely. Boys in boarding schools encourage this sort of thing; it keeps hot young blood decently refrigerated. I am right. Look what comes next. *Blue it was*. Right on the nail, old boy, blue it gets. *Deep-frosted, sub-zero blue*. Well now, that shouldn't have happened. You're in trouble, lad. *The ice melted and she was herself*. I bet she was, falling about with merry laughter. Deep-frosted, sub-zero blue and making puddles on the floor! The idiot deserves it. Coloured condoms, indeed!

But condoms were no laughing matter, as we were soon to discover: they had the power to move and shake. In October 1991, critical mass reached fusion in the condom business with a plutonium trigger by the inspired brand name, 'Kama Sutra'. This was no quickie piece of plebian latex for brief encounters of the furtive kind. This was the ultimate 'pleasure enhancer'. If no romantic evening was complete without the Jag, the champagne and roses, candlelight and violins, the perfumed suite with velvet drapes, making love would never be the same again once you slipped on a Kama Sutra, or, *noblesse oblige*, 'let her put it on for you'.

It seems fitting that Katrak—arch instigator of the nascent sex-in-advertising movement of the Sixties—should preside over its apotheosis thirty years into the future. In Gautam Singhania, he found the ideal client; young enough not to know better, muscularly financed (an heir to the Raymond industrial empire), whose penchant for grand prix motor racing augured promisingly for a charge into what might well prove to be more hazardous territory. Living at the edge had always been meat and drink to Katrak. Chord called to empathic chord. There were worlds waiting to be won.

They did their homework and the results were depressing.

Research revealed that for every hundred men who understood the need to use the product, only seven actually did. It was the classic 'downer': the condom was perceived as a clumsy rubber sheath, used out of necessity or fear, an artificial denial of both spontaneity and pleasure. Katrak and Singhania took risky and calculated decision: they would go for broke, a total reversal of existing attitudes—from product to communications with no-holds-barred *en route*. It was all or nothing.

The product was ultra-thin, textured, contoured, dotted on the outside to 'give the woman extra pleasure': India's first truly sexy condom. The pack was slim, flat, modestly rectangular, no hint of the tell-tale bulge in his wallet (or, for that matter, her purse). A white signature on midnight black, with the letters 'K' and 'S' picked out in red. No lavatorial sniggering here; it would do honour to your drawing-room, montaged à la Andy Warhol, opposite the Salvador Dali. The brand name was chosen with care—out of scores—as much for its explicitness as for its advertising potential. Indeed, the copy in all three advertisements began with the brand name in the headline: 'The Kamasutra On Acting Like A Man . . . A man should gather from the actions of the woman of what disposition she is and in what way she likes to be enjoyed (Book II, Part VIII).' More in the same vein in the body copy, though it's hard to concentrate, what with Pooja Bedi (Kabir and Protima's daughter, a neat example of Jungian fulfilment) in orgasmic abandon in the arms of a memorably forgettable stud.

The thirty second TV commercial was pure sexual whimsy (Katrak snarls!). Through a blue filter, Pooja does a sizzling number with the sexiest showerhead on the idiot box—a glistening, silver phallus so mesmerizing in her naughty little hands, that when the real thing makes an appearance—attached to a male hunk who leaps out of a

rowing-boat, disrobes and joins her—one feels it should be declared instantly redundant, excised, stuffed, mounted and hung up on the wall with her other trophies, leaving Pooja and that gorgeous showerhead to get on with it! The soundtrack (no flies on Katrak) is a single word—Kamasutra—repeated, huskily, every four seconds.

Nothing succeeds like excess. A twenty-page, full-colour supplement in *Debonair* engaged the reader's attention with such gems of arcana as the world's oldest condom (Egyptian linen, 3,000 years ago); Casanova's you-can't-be-too-careful answer to the problem (condoms made from animal intestines); and hats off to the Original Inventor, King Charles II's personal physician, Dr Condom, who created a sheath for the Royal Member. All quite incidental to the denouement, unfolding over three pages; Pooja, heavy-lidded, post-coital, arms folded modestly over a pair of bosoms (!) which would have won Wadhwani's instant approval and stuck on as a footnote, the real thing: a free sample of the product, with the coy advice, 'ask for K. S.'. Stuff and nonsense. The Indian male was ready for sexual nirvana. To a man, they said, KAMASUTRA!

Three months after the campaign was launched, stocks ran out in the shops and the advertising was called to a halt.

Kama Sutra had made the earth move.

Bhagwan Wadhwani, gone before with honour and distinction, would have raised three cheers.

(‘*You gotta hand it to dem, kid!*’)



The  
Contract  
of  
Silence

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Ashok Row Kavi



# The Contract of Silence



WHEN THE STIRRINGS STARTED, the fantasies were all very disturbing. Beautiful men floated in the mental mist, their pectorals and pubes making their sexuality all very obvious. And the bubble burst one day on the football grounds that were perched on the seashore of Mahim Bay.

Right there, in the middle of the game, everything came to a halt. The wolf-whistles were deafening. The girls had come into the ground for their recreation period while our game was still on. The boys loved it. That's the first time I realized that women were objects of sexual desire; an extraordinary feeling of something having gone wrong dawned on me. There were no women in my paradise.

It was nearly a year since my affair with S had started. A strapping, swarthy senior who was the object of my sexual desires, we had quick, furtive sex in the sprawling school campus. Sometimes it was the boys' cloakroom and sometimes

behind the old banyan tree that grew in the grounds of the quaint one-storeyed structure that was the Bombay Scottish High School.

After a year of such bliss it was horrifying to be told that a chit of a girl was a better screw than I. I don't think I got over the wolf-whistles from S appreciating a top heavy Anglo-Indian girl called Rosemary. 'What a juicy . . .' he had said. To me the female genitals were a sort of wound I had played doctor-doctor with (yes, with Rosemary's) and found too repulsive for words. How could anybody in his right mind think that it was juicy?

The decision that evening was a watershed in my life. I decided that I had to get to the bottom of this. Discussion with Anna (Daddy) was one way out. I was just over twelve. Anna was a barrel-chested film producer; sickeningly heterosexual, monogamous to a fault and an incredibly sensitive person. The discussion went along these lines:

Ashok: Anna, how are babies born?

Anna: Uh! What's the problem?

Ashok: The boys in school were discussing. They say that men and women do it like frogs. One-on-top-of-the-other. Is it true?

Anna: (Taking out a plug and socket from his electrical repair kit after much hesitation) It's more like this. When a plug gets into a socket, the electricity flows, you see. You see, men have the plugs and the women have the sockets. When they get together, things happen and the electricity flows. That's called sex.

Ashok: It sounds very unhygienic. How can they do that, it's too atrocious, Anna.

I felt completely betrayed. Even Anna thought it was

right. To me it was not at all the natural way of things and nothing would convince me even if Anna thought it was the way things should be. I looked askance at him. My anxiety obviously made him uncomfortable.

Anna proved himself that day. He wasn't just a father. He was a friend. Next week, the two volumes of Havelock Ellis' *The Psychology of Sex* were left conspicuously in the living-room. When I grabbed them, Anna groaned and heaved a sigh of relief. His job was over! Mine had just begun. What a journey that would be! I have yet to reach my destination.

Havelock Ellis was only the first step in exploring the fascinating world I had been thrown into, as it were, by fate. Understanding one's sexuality is always a difficult and dreaded process on the path to adulthood. My steps into adulthood were even more difficult. My introvert nature, withdrawn to a fault sometimes, made talking out my problems a major hurdle. Coupled with this was my blunt way of asking questions which others found a bit unsettling.

Dr P, my psychiatrist, made the best of it! The early morning sessions with him at the Nair Hospital in Bombay intrigued my mother. I had to lie to her saying that they were part of my college routine. It was embarrassing the way Dr P handled it: as if it were a deviation, an odd kind of behaviour which the rest of humanity didn't really like amidst it.

I was lucky in the fact that my homosexual identity was established as 'natural' before social regimentation could suppress it. Dr P took three sessions with me and then commented: 'You are all right. I am afraid I can do very little for you.' Of course, I was surprised when he thought fellatio (oral sex) was deviant. He got a psychiatric intern to sit in on one of my last sessions, who commented on my orientation till I burst out: 'I am afraid, Doctor, I am OK and you are deviant.' My visits to the venerable doctor ended on that friendly note.

It was then that I resolved to study my orientation as

objectively as possible; this attitude helped me immensely in my career as a journalist. Though perfect objectivity is a myth, the effort to be objective is the hallmark of a professional journalist. But it is a quality that made it difficult for a person to operate in a profession swarming with ideological hacks of all kinds, as it was in the mid-Eighties.

\*

After high school it was college; from the tight discipline of Bombay Scottish it was to the scandalous open-mindedness of St. Xavier's. The first thing one noticed as a child of the Inquisition in Goa was the way we Hindus turned a Nelson's eye to blatantly bigoted minorities. The college, known for its alleged liberal education, was a clever Venus fly-trap where 'modernization' was a synonym for Westernization.

Two incidents made me grow up very fast. V was a stunning woman of mixed parentage doing an arts course while I was in the science stream. It was V who took me under her wing and I learnt what it was to be a 'man'. Football and hockey took up most of my evenings while gossiping with V and M took up the recess time. Both women gave me the run-down on 'men' and I learnt to be the subversive in the male fraternity.

V is now a top banking official and is known for her savvy and ruthless ways with men. And yet the woman has never hurt anybody intentionally. 'You'll reap what you sow,' she used to repeat *ad nauseam*. Both girls were beautiful, buxom battleaxes whom men lusted after with frantic feverishness. All three of us would go to the Metro cinema nearby, bunking classes to catch the matinée shows at eleven in the morning. V and M discovered new ways to hassle men; like throwing empty popcorn bags filled with pee on the front rows and then pretending to be the paragons of virtue. They taught me how to lie with a straight face and face bullies head on.

A frightening incident took place on our visit to Elephanta. It taught me that men could always be cowed down by strong women. The infamous trio (V, M and I) were taking a Sunday outing on the island of Elephanta in the Bombay harbour when I discovered that I was supposedly very privileged to have two girls with me. A bunch of boys started hassling us on our climb to the caves. It started with the line: '*Ai, battery. Do ladkyon sey kya karte ho?*' (Hey spectac-wearing guy. What are you doing with two women?). Before it could get out of hand, V had gone up to the leader, caught him by the collar and given him a backhand whack. Meanwhile, M started a torrent of Punjabi abuse saying uncomplimentary things about their mothers. The boys took to their heels. That's when I learnt that men are essentially bullies and never stand up except in groups.

\*

This would help me later on in the faction fighting in the gay community. The leanings of the 'society queens' in Bombay were mostly towards 'cadillac communism', as I cryptically called it. Tackling them was half the fun.

It started as the usual party gup-shup at K's place. The protagonist was a high flying Oxbridge executive typical of the ruling political class: Mr A was an admirer of a proto-Pakistani columnist masquerading as a secularist, who was, in turn, a camp-follower of Ms Rana Kabbani; a Syrian feminist who appeared homophobic in her writings.

Ms Kabbani lashed out at the adventurer-Orientalists, like Sir Richard Burton and Lawrence of Arabia, for being 'deviants', read 'homosexuals'. Ms Kabbani's grouse was that these 'deviants' had been rather callous about the alleged 'unbridled sexuality' of the Orient; it reflected their own sexual orientation. Mr A accepted this vapid anti-Occidentalism and

homophobia. But A did not challenge the fact that both pederasty and paedophilia were inherent to Arab cultures.

In fact, Kabbani herself in her 'research' refuses to even acknowledge the high tension male-male sexuality present in Arab/Muslim cultures.

It was K, the host, who tried to bring all the factions together whereas the cadillac-communist brigade never let that hinder their tirade against *Bombay Dost*.<sup>\*</sup> This conversation should suffice.

Ashok: We need a lesbian and gay newsletter now.

Cadillac-communist(CC): But why? There are more urgent priorities. Like the poor in India; eliminating poverty is first priority. We homos are doing quite well, thank you.

Ashok: Sure you're doing well in your Gymkhana where you suck off the chokra-boys and pay them off. But what about the guys out there who need support networks?

CC: Who needs those vernacular creeps? They are just good or bad fucks!

Ashok: Oh really . . . That is terrific commitment towards democracy and equality.

CC: Look, if I want to show solidarity I do it at the India Day Parade in New York. I was there in my sari-drag last year. Here it's different.

Ashok: Why?

CC: Gay Lib is no priority here. Remember that dialogue from *Chakra* where the hero says: *Pehle pet ka sawal aur phir pet ke nichay ka sawal* (First

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\* *Bombay Dost* is the first magazine for homosexuals to be published in India. It was founded in 1990 by Ashok Row Kavi.

consider the matters concerning your stomach and then think about what is below your stomach: meaning sexuality).

Ashok: And who is to determine this priority?

CC: The party leadership, of course. You will have to be educated for this, you know.

Ashok: So the party [in this case the Communist Party—Marxist] will tell us how large a slice of cake we can have of freedom? But they say it is a bourgeoisie decadence. So . . . .

CC: The party will decide someday that it is not.

Ashok: What do we do in the meantime, arsehole?

Vegetate and grow our cherries back, you prick!

CC: Oh dear, don't start your abuses.

That was the beginning of a long and bitter war within the gay community which I won hands down. And it was thanks to V and her ways that I had learnt to tackle this sinecure class.

The argument in K's house was interesting in the sense that it exposed the arrogance of India's ruling class. It was K, a system's manager in one of the world's largest multinationals, who created space for *Bombay Dost* in his company house.

Coming out to V and M was an uneasy experience though it taught me that if people really loved you, they wouldn't care about your sexuality. When V decided to explore what sexual possibilities existed between us, it was a disaster. She dismissed the whole episode with the line: 'Ashok, I always knew it but that's what makes you what you are: a gentle understanding guy!' It was the most touching thing V had done for a long time. After that we grew closer than ever before.

It was around that time that Khushwant Singh took over the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, then India's premier periodical. I was barely eighteen but the subject kept cropping up in my mind. How was it possible to reach out to a scattered, invisible community? I thought it was best to write about the history of homosexuality in Europe and then connect it up with the scene in India.

Surprisingly, Khushwant published the article. I received over 350 letters and that got me entry into an incredible gay circuit. B was a top advertising executive who ran an 'illegal' gay bar in his digs on Marine Drive. B would start slapping on make-up at four in the afternoon. He would then traipse over to Chowpatty to pick up a malishwala (masseur). B had one kink—his dressing-table had a small collection of injection vials filled with yellow-coloured liquid. B's kink was collecting the pee of all his 'tricks' (the men he slept with). It was weird to see those vials resting cheek by jowl with Elizabeth Arden and Christian Dior. But a big battle was on the cards.

The usual procedure at B's bar was to get your own bottle and keep it in the cabinet. The servant measured out the drinks and marked the level with a wax pencil. Soon, Tony (my boss) and I discovered that we never felt even a bit high despite three stiff pegs. Guess what? B used to drain our bottles and pour in doctored gin. Tony was so furious that he threw the pee-collection on to the roof of the Talk-of-the-Town, the restaurant directly below the apartment. We have called the place 'Pee-of-the-Town' since then. As for B, he sat down in front of his opulent dressing-table with tears streaming down his face, making deep furrows in the Max Factor. 'Oh dear, dear me, I'll have to collect their pee all over again,' he screeched in a high soprano.

That was the next lesson: never be taken for granted in the gay world or they'll take advantage of you. B was such a

selfish bitch that when he got into trouble, all his friends deserted him and he died on the pavement outside St. George Hospital in downtown Bombay.

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Tony started *Debonair* as a lark. The owner, Susheel Soman, was one of those rich industrialists who liked what is called ‘social-gup-shup’ (society gossip) and Tony was very good at it. He taught me how male models needed to have kerchieves wrapped round their penises to make their crotches look gargantuan, most of them being rather small in that department. We used to leave the selection of the woman for the centre spread to Moinuddin, our technical director, while we concentrated on the main readership of *Debonair*—MEN.

Tony taught me how shallow sophistication was. He pulled off some pretty silly capers in a south Bombay bar which used to be a great cruising place in those days when pink gins were just five chips. But he also taught me something else; you never get men through perseverance. Manipulation and constantly shifting grounds were the war zones of the sexual battles between men and men. It was amazing how petty and puerile men could be. In many cases, I discovered that men could be more bitchy and gossipy than women. In most cases, gays always had the upper hand. It was precisely for that reason that heterosexual men feared homos. Insecure women, not very confident of their sexuality, were the other enemies of gay men. But that was again brought to me in an incident at work.

‘Ms A was a top-heavy woman reporter transferred from the Delhi office to the *Indian Express* in Bombay. She was an instant hit with my seniors—R and his coterie. Soon she was playing one person off against another with transparent sexuality. One day, she tried the ‘let-my-palloo-fall-so-you-can-see-my-cleavage’ with me and it failed. When she heard

about my being gay, she lost her shirt. We were enemies from that instant and I saw the ancient evil one in her eye; the curse of a woman rejected! There is nothing more contemptible and homophobic than a woman who uses her sexuality to advance her cause. And homosexuals through history have known exactly such women and used them to advantage. The way Alexander used his Persian queen and his mother to conquer the world is a reminder of gay men's understanding of insecure women.

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However, it was discovering India's homosexual heritage that made the most sense to me. By now, it was obvious that formal education was not worth the paper the degrees were printed on. India's educational infrastructure was built by Macaulay, to stuff a shelf full of books and overload a child's neurons. A general deterioration was so obvious in the intellectual discussions one went to that it was undignified to argue with some of the leftist hacks. The general tendency was to defend the minorities regardless of what they did. For example, the defence of the government's reservation policy was too foolish for words. Just because a certain class or caste made up twenty per cent of the populace it was promised twenty per cent of the jobs. This Mandalization of Indian society was an extraordinary, divisive method taking the reservation policy to ridiculous lengths. But that was exactly the intention of this ruling class.

I argued otherwise. If gays were ten per cent of the economically active population, did that mean that we deserved only ten per cent of the jobs in the IAS? That was ridiculous because we might have ninety per cent of the creative jobs in advertising, for example, or we might have all the jobs in the starry film world and on the stage. The world's

homosexual minority had learnt through the ages not to be marginalized. Gays everywhere had a lesson to teach other minorities on how not to be disempowered. Studying religion helped. It came with a bang one day even as my second love affair was coming to a stormy end. My 'mother-in-law', a Muslim, did everything but burn me for dowry, as I sarcastically recall now on hindsight. But the worst complaint she had had was that I had turned her sonny boy's bedroom into a '*butkhana*' (den of idols). However much I endeavoured to satisfy her, the religious question always came foremost. Finally, the relationship floundered on the reef of religion and broke up. I never looked back. I was grateful for the memories and decided that there was no room for bitterness. M, from a feudal Muslim family, still regrets it and thinks it would have worked if his mother hadn't interfered, something impossible to achieve in India.

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My knowledge of Islam would come in handy when I faced TV cameras on Channel Four in England. The chief mullah of a London mosque pitched Leviticus at us ('thou shall not sleep with a man as thou sleeps with a woman') and the gay group had its snappy answer ready. 'We don't sleep with men as we sleep with women. We sleep with men as we should sleep with men.' That stumped the mullah.

When I insisted that the Prophet was a benevolent and broad-minded soul, the mullah brought out a book which he waved about. 'This book names a hundred diseases which homosexuals carry. They are disease-carriers,' he ranted. I quickly brought out my filofax and waved it. 'I've got a book which shows that heterosexuals carry five hundred diseases,' I retorted. That left him foaming at the mouth. The trick with religious bigots is to fight them on their own territory.

If Islam in India curbed the open sexuality of feminine eroticism—notice the disfigured Hindu temple sculptures—male homosexuality was brought out of the closet almost immediately by the Mughal emperor Babar, who built the great gardens at Agra for the Afghani man he loved. This great love affair was commented on wryly by his daughter, Gulbadan, in her autobiography spanning the lives of four Mughal emperors.

\*

I had managed to rediscover much of my Hindu heritage with a stint at the Ramakrishna Mission where Swami Ganeshananda and Swami Harshananda, two extraordinary monks, managed to bestow on me the strict regimen of a monastic asceticism. Even amidst plenty, I never again felt the urge to join the rat race for the dazzling consumer materialism that epitomizes the middle class in India. It also gave me great strength during my poverty-stricken days when I was trying to put *Bombay Dost* on its feet and money was difficult to come by.

It was one of these two monks who first ‘unveiled’ my homosexuality through scribblings in a notebook in which scriptural questions were to be answered. I was called immediately into his study. The counselling session went like this:

Swamiji: Ashok, this is a very interesting side of your personality. Are you here to study about the spirit or are you running away from some torment of your flesh? [I just loved that line.]

Ashok: Swamiji, I really don’t know. But I must tell you that I have some very puzzling dreams . . .

Swamiji: Puzzling dreams? What does that mean?

Ashok: Confusing in the sense that I dream of men

instead of women. I feel that is wrong . . . don't you think so?

Swamiji: No, I don't think that is wrong at all. Why do you feel so bad about it? Do you feel it is wrong?

Ashok: No, I don't feel it is wrong but I've been made to think so.

Swamiji: By whom? Why?

Ashok: By society; people around me. Because what I want to do is considered wrong.

Swamiji: Look, what is wrong is relative. I don't think many rules made by man would be liked by God. They were written by men for men. Just as an example: it is considered good manners among Eskimos to offer their wives to strangers as a gesture of goodwill but it is wrong in most other cultures. Now, can we call the Eskimos uncivilized because of that? Don't get taken in by what others say is right or wrong. Drag everything deep into your heart, study it with discrimination and then ask the question—am I hurting any soul through my action? Can the pain be avoided and if so for what goal? Is the goal worth achieving? When you get sound answers for those questions then go ahead and do it, boldly and brazenly. Be like Swamiji [Vivekananda] and stop not till the goal is reached.

Ashok: But what about people? They can be very cruel . . .

Swamiji: But the world has always been a cruel place, Ashok. Whatever makes you think that a python eats its prey with love or compassion? In more ways than one, even Thakur [Shri Ramakrishna] said that 'a cobra worships you with his venom because it is the only precious thing he has'. [This was when one disciple told Shri

Ramakrishna that another disciple used to go to Calcutta and spread nasty stories about Him.] So don't worry about the world. Try to make a reasonable life for yourself by not hurting anybody as far as possible. When you go out and find somebody purposely and wilfully obstructing you or hurting you then cut him down dead. Don't pussyfoot with him. Better a clean kill than a half-dead snake who might bite you when you are unaware.

Ashok: But I think I am a homosexual . . . .

Swamiji: Look, you might be one. Even if you are, so what? Men have loved each other since the beginning of mankind. You are not someone with horns. Try and sort that out using those three questions I told you to answer. If the answers satisfy you then go ahead and make a life for yourself and fight for what you think is right. But remember then what is good for you should be good for all who think like you. It cannot be only right for you, and your right to happiness must mean the least unhappiness for others around you. Finally, when you have lived out your life according to those beliefs, there is a place to rest. That is what this ashram is about. It is not a place to run away to. Not a place to discover God by running away from life. Life is like the coconut tree which slowly sheds its leaves and then bears fruit when it grows tall and looks from high above upon the earth below. . . .

Ashok: Swamiji, if only things were as easy as you make them sound . . . .

Swamiji: Life is very easy if you have your priorities right. Go out there and act. Action makes the man. Don't be like other Hindus. We fools never 'act'. We

pass the buck, we preach and pontificate about our great philosophy, the most elevating on earth . . . . Because Hindus never ‘act’, that is one quality that Vivekananda lauded in the Western civilization. Through ‘action’ comes creation. Vishnu conquers infinite Time ‘Kala’ [the great hooded cobra on which he is shown sitting] but only when he summons Brahma [the creator] does the Universe and mankind come into being. Otherwise who would have been there to admire Him? So just go out there and start doing things. And do them to the best of your capability.

This conversation, which I had noted in my diary, has been reproduced as best as possible. Much of it was in the vernacular (Marathi and Konkani) and some of those colloquial nuances have been lost. But it was in a monastery that my ‘coming out’ took place. I am ever grateful to the monk of the Ramakrishna order for making my coming out so painless and worthy of all that is great in man’s heritage. Thank you, Swamiji! It is finally only people like you who will be heard and admired for what you are; a truly evolved human being.

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My coming out was with a bang. When I returned home I would go out to cruise with a vengeance. Since my first days in the *Indian Express* as a junior reporter, rarely, if ever, did I come home before midnight. And the scores? For people who don’t know what gay life is, Bombay can be a dead place after nine at night. For us gays, life began after sunset. From Chowpatty, the famous beach in the centre of town where the popular bhel puri (a tangy snack) was invented, all the way to Borivli

where even the guards at the National Park were gay.

My coming out, to office colleagues, was dramatic. Most of us reporters and sub-editors took the last train home from Churchgate in South Bombay. The last train at one a.m. was also called the Queen's Special in gay slang. There were five of us led by R, an orthodox Karnataka linguist who believed even heterosexuality was sinful. That Saturday night there was a particularly heated argument about sex. It went like this:

R [my senior]: I'm sick of this sex, sex, sex all the time in our magazine section. Why don't they stop talking about it? It's sick!

Ashok: What's so sick about it? It's a subject that is worth discussing in a repressive society . . . .

R: Well, it's embarrassing. It's . . . .

Into the railway coach walked M, a particularly glamorous glitterbug of a gay. He was dressed to kill; there was stardust in his hair and on his face and he was wearing a tanktop, showing off his biceps and pectorals to good effect.

M: Oh, you silly fellow. Where were you tonight? Do you know the fun we had at the Bandstand? [He was talking of the Cooperage Bandstand where gays cruised navy boys.]

Ashok: [trying to fob off conversing with M] Oh M. Sorry, but I was working. This is my boss at the office. [This was supposed to be a hint to M to shut up but it wasn't taken.]

M: The seafood [navy guys] was fantastic, yaar. I got this Rajput fellow who went on and on in Lovelane [a little alley behind the Bandstand]. I got him through the fence man. I still have the chain-link marks on my bum yaar. Yum, yum!

I was blushing. R was red as a lobster in a steampot. Finally R got up and heaved out of the compartment at Marine Lines. My cover was blown by M who went on chattering about his conquests.

But, to R's credit, the subject never came up again. In spite of being such a conservative fellow, his attitude never changed nor has he made a single homophobic remark to date. R refuses to even acknowledge my sexuality and there it stands.

\*

It was by looking at Akka's condition that I knew my position as a single person was a severe handicap in India. Akka was Anna's only and elder sister. She was also a child-widow and had come to live with us when she lost her husband at sixteen. Though respected and loved as the head of our family, even as a surrogate mother to us, her position was secure only on a contract—the contract of silence; silence about her sexuality.

This was my position too. I was secure in my position as the patriarch of the Row-Kavis being the eldest, unmarried brahmachari (bachelor) brother. But this security was tied to a silence regarding my sexuality. Any sexuality, if not harnessed for the family good, was taboo. I would finally break that silence to transgress the social contract that holds homosexuals and lesbians prisoners of a heterosexist society. This I was, I think, fated to do. It was part of my secular mission and the result of my liberation at the Ramakrishna monastery. I am grateful to the monks for the spiritual strength they gave me. It would give me a firm commitment in seeing that *Bombay Dost* would succeed.

Akka's final isolation and rejection by every child she raised would convince me that Indian families held nothing sacred in their drive for self-perpetration. Towards the end, at seventy-four, she would be a bitter but brave old woman. The

child she had rejected because it was weak and had few chances of survival had grown up to be a homosexual, a social outcast. The first category she did not understand, the second she had fought all her life to avoid becoming a part of. But her silence had not paid off. The sacrifice she had made—of her sexuality—in order to bring up her brother's children had been taken for granted. She discovered that she had nothing to call her own.

I decided never to let that happen to me. The family—and the world—had to accept Ashok Row Kavi, complete with his homosexuality. Or nothing at all. Those who chose the second option would get the right retort: a cold rejection! On that score there could be no compromise.

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Bombay in the Seventies and early Eighties was ripe for a gay subculture. A distinct class of skilled professionals had a firm grip on the city's cultural life. A corporate work ethic had finally evolved in contrast to the babu-raj of Delhi and the Bengali queasiness regarding sexuality in Calcutta. All these signs were important ingredients for a gay subculture.

There were already rather naughty gay parties in such staid places like Matunga and Ghatkopar. I went for a gay party hosted in a Marathi school in Mulund where a teacher's housing quarters had been turned into an orgy room. Within five years, the private feature of these gay parties had gone public. The first such leap forward was thanks to a crazy incident at an ace Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot's house on Pali Hill.

B, the pilot, had left the IAF thanks to a liaison between him and the mess cook that was about to burst into the open. If B had stayed on in the IAF, he would possibly have been not merely the most handsome officer in the 'Vayu Sena' but also

the Chief of Air Staff. However, they allowed him an honourable discharge if he resigned his commission. He left gladly to join up as the head of an agricultural air-spraying business.

We were having an innocent orgy in his bedroom while his wife was supposedly away in Calcutta or wherever. The bed had been removed and wall-to-wall mattresses had been laid out with rubber matting covering them. Anybody going into the room was to remove his clothes and throw them on clothes-horses placed outside the door. After six men had trooped in bare-assed, a can of coconut oil was poured over the human pyramid. It was fun except that I'd never liked group sex. It turned into a nightmare when the lights suddenly came on and B's wife stood at the door screaming like a banshee. Her husband had his legs in the air (we called it the Flying Angel position) being screwed by a stud from Thane. I've never seen such an olympic race to get out of a house.

Anyway, I decided that enough was enough and soon after that we had Bombay's first mad public party at a hotel in suburban Ghatkopar. The owner had decorated the whole terrace with twinkling lights and we had numbered tickets with tight security. Each ticket had to be sold against two guarantees from established gays.

It was amazing to see the energy liberated that day. Gay couples like R and V thought it was the first time they could show their love for each other. Snazzy singles like C and F flirted madly. And the prizes for individual dances like mujra musicals and rumba-sambas were snapped up by unexpected queens from the suburbs. It was a grand exposition of talent, such as had never been seen before, all in one place. Queens came dressed to kill, some in exaggerated macho clothes while others wore feathers and sequins. Glitter powder, silver lipstick and high-heeled shoes, all the things Ghatkopar had never seen before. As for the 'hotel', some of the waiters did get seduced

but it was not the gays who were at fault. After all, the beautiful and the bold could hardly be blamed for what they were, mad crazy poofs.

Nothing succeeds like excess, goes the saying. And soon R from Chembur, an orthodox little South Indian Brahmin, started organizing the first gay do's. By then, in April 1990, the first copy of *Bombay Dost* had hit the city like a ton of bricks. We got excellent coverage.

The first issue was historic in more ways than one. First, the Editorial Collective of *Bombay Dost* stumped quite a few from the cadillac-communist brigade. The alleged hard core Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sanghi, me of course, had inducted three Muslim male members into the Collective. Out of the three women, one was a Muslim. So if there was a divide along communal lines, then I would be out-voted.

Efforts to torpedo the venture started immediately. The main opposition faction was led by a film director who thought he ought to be leading the movement.

It got to be ridiculous, actually. They started with a call to socially boycott me. Then a graduate of the IIM, Ahmedabad, got into a crazy, drunken, verbal assault on me even as he asked me in a hushed voice: 'As one Brahmin to another, tell me, how can you work with Muslims?' This from an avowed secularist!

*Bombay Dost* went from strength to strength. We were reported in the *New York Times*, the *London Times* and even in the esoteric Columbia School of Journalism's magazine.

By the fifth issue, *Bombay Dost* had started getting advertisements which had an immediate impact. It was amazing how nobody had seen this huge niche market; fifty million males waiting for just such a newsletter. *Bombay Dost* was not just a newsletter but a movement by now. It was nearly a year since we had started off as an underground sheet for the gay and lesbian community but it represented something much

more. *Bombay Dost* was a lifeboat for many people who thought they had no one to turn to. In a heterosexist world where marriage was a marketplace, we had created a space to be ourselves. But there was trouble in paradise!

When we had started we hadn't expected the type of response we got which changed our agenda. We had just managed to get a pokey little space in a business centre at Bandra, opposite the station. It was to be commented upon nastily by Arvind Kala, who wrote a book on homosexuals in India.

One day, after the first issue had been out for a month, there was a desperate call from Mrs Pinto, the manager of the business centre we were using as our mail-in address.

'Why is nobody picking up the mail,' she asked tiredly. 'We have 200 letters here. For Heavens' sake somebody had better come and pick it up,' she added.

The torrent had started! Those first letters were like winged messengers from my huge new family spread over the subcontinent. Many were practising homosexuals who had not evolved a self-identity. India's gays were like swans swimming in a dream waiting for that magic touch to wake them up.

But there were some who disagreed—mostly English-educated Indians with a skin-deep knowledge of not just their own culture but also of what was happening abroad; this lot were mostly armchair critics. But some of them felt that it was too soon to have a Gay Consciousness Movement. The regional and vernacular press had lurid stories of how *Dost* had horrendous male nudes and pornography. Most of these stories were, of course, untrue but the best one was an interview a local politician gave in which a new theory of homosexuality was propounded. According to him, homos were dangerous because they seduced young boys. Also the cause of homosexuality 'was a blood disorder where female blood

corpuscles ate up the male blood corpuscles and a man's masculinity was subverted by terrible female characteristics'. It showed a distinct link between homophobia and misogyny.

However, it was within the home that much of the bitterness bore fruit. One of my siblings complained to Amma (Mother) that his eldest brother's homosexuality was making life miserable for his poor dear wife and two kids. The wife mostly ate out while the kids were left with the ayah to turn into ill-bred brats. It was strange that his wife's activities (questionable to say the least but which I shall not expand on) were not reflecting on the kids.

Amma stood up bravely to the age-old trick. Suggested Amma when it was brought to her notice, 'Look, this duo is the typical modern lot. They want to have their cake and eat it. My suggestion is that he should give up the Row-Kavi surname and take up his wife's surname. If he used his elder brother's name when it suited him, he can't turn around and try disowning him now. In fact, I'm ready to disown *him*.'

Sure enough, when Akka died in March 1993, and I was away in Canada, Amma saw to it that that particular sibling was refused permission to touch the funeral fire and the *aasti* (ashes) of the old lady. He had been disowned in public, a fitting reply to him and his painted, homophobic wife.

My poor little brother with his perpetual pout had committed the other cardinal sin that gays love to watch out for: assume too many things in a war they thought would be fought for money. Little do heterosexuals know that money is the last thing on a gay mind when a serious war begins.

Probably, V's lessons had been learnt extra well by me. Though avoiding confrontation and conflict is the best way out for gays who have suffered through the centuries for their sexual orientation, I think gays make excellent fighters when the situation demands it. Playing the game of reconciliation and yet being prepared for confrontation have been the

watchwords of this community as the careful management of our family squabbles had showed.

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*Bombay Dost* progressed by leaps and bounds. Far too much responsibility fell on me and bearing the cross was no cakewalk.

By December 1991, I was already on the verge of a breakdown. But so crucial was the work and so critical the situation that there was no way that events could be slowed down for my sake. As Rebecca Savila, present secretary-general of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, would keep repeating: 'The planet's oldest and most persecuted minority now faces a now-or-never chance. We either learn to fight for dignity, demanding nothing more than what should be every world citizen's right or we fight to get this invisible nation together.'

As many of us Asian gay activists had carefully confided to our government health officials, the conclusion by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that the spread of HIV/AIDS in Asia was heterosexual was wrong. Not only was HIV/AIDS detected in India by forcibly testing female prostitutes but it pretended that homosexuality just did not exist.

The incursion of Western ideas through Christianity and communism had wiped out the very visibility of sexual minorities. So thoroughly had this been achieved that most Indians were ashamed of the homosexual heritage within Indian culture. The great god at the Sabarimalai shrine in Kerala, Ayyappa-Skanda, was not only a product of a sexual union between Shiva and Vishnu but he was called the husband of all army-men. In the Renuka-Yellamma tradition, boys too would be dedicated to the fertility goddess. But this found no mention in the concocted histories or mythologies.

Now, of course, all these and more would have to be harnessed to fight the new scourge of mankind, HIV/AIDS. The Panos Institute in London had already noted something new happening in Asia. In its November 1991 issue of "WorldAIDS Briefing", the premier Institute reporting the new frightening disease, had called homosexuals 'The Unsung Heroes in the South'.

"WorldAIDS Briefing" put it bluntly: 'Despite formidable proscriptions against homosexuality in many developing countries and Eastern Europe, gay (homosexual) men have been an advance guard of AIDS educators and carers.' It quoted *Bombay Dost* extensively, forcing the Indian health authorities to take us seriously.

The only way out was continued education and a simultaneous campaign to sensitize Asian homosexuals to consolidate their identity. In Kuala Lumpur, my friend Heesham Hussein and in Indonesia, Dede Oetamo would also feel the same way. We linked up with the Filipino gay activist, Jomar of Reachout and Austero Bong of the Library Foundation, Roy Chan representing Singapore's gay groups and finally, the elderly Minami-San of Japan to set up the Gay Asian and Lesbians Groups' Association (GALGA). GALGA, set up in late 1992, was the first umbrella organization of Asian gay groups to help the new invisible minorities all over Asia. Sexually abused and suppressed by the heterosexist majority, Asia's myriad lesbian and gay groups hoped to lead their flocks into a more dignified lifestyle in a future rampant with AIDS and other killer Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

Mid-1992 was really one of the most hectic periods of my life. Starting with a workshop for US Congressmen in Washington I did an exhausting tour of six cities in three countries. After presenting a paper on the "Emerging gay peer groups in Bombay" at Amsterdam's Eighth International Congress on HIV/AIDS, I came home to burnout and bad news: I had diabetes and drug-resistant tuberculosis.

Lying in my hospital bed, dejected and depressed, there was no time to wallow in self-pity. My friends never left me alone! The nurse would say, ‘Your family may have forgotten you but you sure have a lot of friends.’

There was Suhail and Shridhar and Ramesh, Salim, Edwin in drag and podgy, ageing Chandan and studious Yusuf and Jehangir and Sopan and Cory, Rakesh and Pallav; every day! They came with flowers and naughty, nasty get-well cards (‘You’ll do ANYTHING to get attention, won’t you,’ screeched one). The nurses had a problem driving them out after visiting hours. One even gave a rude nurse a few tips on making-up her face!

I had come home!



Behind  
the Veil :  
Thoughts  
on  
Adolescent  
Sexuality

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Puru P. Das



## Behind the Veil



THE DIAMOND DEWDROPS GLISTEN in the soft focus sunrise of the Indian sexual revolution. I can feel them, sticky; smell them, my senses feed on their pungent maternal nourishment. But I cannot acknowledge them because of the diaphanous veil that has swathed my eyes ever since puberty. The veil blinds me by separating what I do privately and what I advocate publicly.

I am the Indian teenager. I am free of the Raj, free from Nehru. Rajiv Gandhi was my role model. Rajiv Gandhi and Michael Jackson. I am a curious mix of kitsch second-hand Americana and Anglo-Indian schools. I am the Benetton-clad, bastard child of the Eighties. Corruption doesn't bother me as long as I can still bribe traffic cops for driving my Maruti without a licence. But mark me well—I am the future.

The veil is everywhere and always has been. It is the last veil Salome shed as she danced naked before her uncle, Herod, her nubile body undulating to the rhythm of the executioner's

song. It is the burqa on a young Muslim girl, it is the *ghunghat* on an eighteen-year-old Hindu bride. The veil manifests itself in our psyche in a more intangible form. The price Herod paid for a glimpse of his niece's virginity was high. The Bible is still caked with John the Baptist's blood. How many saints can we afford to kill before the frozen *apsaras* at Khajuraho dance again? It is only when we accept the price of our own sexuality that we can claim to have become sexually liberated.

I am a child-man, more man than child. The afterbirth has dried up and the umbilical cord has been severed at my belly button. Puberty came suddenly late one night. The expected physical changes followed. The maternal possession of my body ended, to be replaced by a sexual possession whose lead was not the umbilical cord but the testicles. Not that puberty was a surprise. I had begun the long vigil for its arrival since I was ten. Before that were the lies my parents told me: babies came from heaven on the back of a stork. It was when I was ten that I understood (or thought I understood). My parents being liberal-minded, told me, omitting what they thought was vulgar or embarrassing. It was the media that was my sex education teacher, answering questions before I could ask them.

The only formal lesson came three years later in school when an elderly matron came to explain the birds and the bees to an already knowing audience. It was the eighth standard and the girls and boys were separated. I am still not sure about what the girls were told but it was probably not very different from what we were. In all it was an exercise in redundancy and I remember that it was the first and last time 'fuck' was written on the blackboard. Its chalky meaning though, was lost in the giggles that ensued. It was the separation of the sexes that really stuck in my mind. The sex educators, (or maybe it was the school) had inadvertently replayed an ancient myth and despite the progressive nature of the lecture had reinforced the

conservative idea that it was acceptable for boys and girls to talk about sex amongst themselves. But to discuss it openly with each other was not. I was thirteen then, and still read Archie comics without really questioning what went on between Archie and Veronica or the naïve psuedo-platonic relationship that the comic books depicted. Everywhere I was surrounded by images that portrayed a relationship between teenagers that was not quite as innocent as existed in the utopian world of comic books.

With puberty came masturbation, hidden behind the veil of middle-class hypocrisy. Masturbation holds a special place in the Indian male's heart. It is said that ninety-nine per cent of men masturbate; the other one per cent are liars. Masturbation provides more than sexual relief. It provides a fulfilment of fantasies. When Madam Five Fingers visits, it is more than sex with one girl but with a hundred, a whole city, in the manner of Lord Krishna. In the imagination the real mixes with the unreal, the corporeal with the divine. Masturbation is a healthy activity yet the old tales of acne, hairy palms and blindness persist and will continue to do so because we will propagate the same myth that our parents did. We do so not because we are stupid or ignorant but because we choose not to see.

The veil that blinds our parents is wrapping itself around our gelly orbs. The veil is not opaque but rather translucent, letting in only what we want to see. Childbirth without the pain, and love without sex. We choose only to view that which is aesthetically pleasing, ignoring the ugly, messy or painful. We fail to realize that pain is the catalyst of our existence. The agony of childbirth ensures that our entrance to the world is heralded by the anguished screams of a mother. The sacred blood from a broken hymen is the manna that feeds our desires.

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The 1960s were a milestone in American history. It was then

that sex finally became open and acceptable. Whether the American sexual revolution was a natural result of the liberal ideas of peace and flower power, or a radical reaction to the repressiveness of the 1950s is less important. The revolution succeeded in finally freeing Americans from the oppressive Christian morality that had denied sexuality as a normal part of man's daily life. 'The orgasm,' Malcolm Muggeridge said in 1966, 'has replaced the cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment.'

Thirty years later in India a similar revolution is starting to take place. We Indians are by nature a conservative people and unlikely to carry the revolution to the extent that the Americans did but in time sexual liberation is likely to free us from middle class prejudices.

The Indian sexual revolution of the 1990s is a natural follow-through of the widespread prosperity of the 1980s. According to some estimates the size of the middle class doubled during that decade. As new people entered the middle class, they brought new attitudes. They had drive. They had climbed their way up from the gutter. They had fewer hang-ups than the English school products of the old guard. They were less well-educated but they were also less prudish.

The Indian sexual revolution is a reflection of the deep-seated need of Indian society to change in the 1990s. It is being propelled forward by the media. It is the baby of the newspapers and television which have moulded it and reared it since its infancy. While thinkers indulge in intellectual debate, Lintas and Mudra are bombarding our minds with images of sex. Advertising exploits not women or men but the idea of sex. It uses sex to sell products. What we buy is not a soap or a detergent but fantasies. The pink and black billboard for Kama Sutra condoms shoves sex down the throat of everyone driving past a crowded seafront—Haji Ali. It may be vulgar but it gets the message across. More importantly, it is a

monument as much as the mosque behind it, a symbol of the growing acceptance of sex. Forget the condoms and kneel before the immortal words 'For the Pleasure of Making Love'. There is no coyness. The pink grabs your eyes and loosens the veil. In black the letters jump out and grab you by the balls. Proudly it proclaims its sexuality. The Kama Sutra billboard is Khajuraho in our own backyard. The black letters are *apsaras* in a frenzied sexual dance.

The Indian film industry with its inimitable ability to imitate has also responded to the sexual revolution. The mass produced films are filled with blatant sexuality while the producers attempt to bypass the censor. Sexual intercourse is not allowed to be shown, so the commercial film makers have devised as many ways possible to get the heroine under a waterfall or caught in a rainstorm. They may have sacrificed plausibility but they have sold films. The boy-meets-girl, loses-girl, gets-girl plot has been resuscitated by a few gallons of water.

The most potent instrument of the sexual revolution, however, is the little black box next to the television screen. The video is the guillotine of our revolution fuelled by pirated cassettes from Hollywood. Every video library that doesn't stock the ubiquitous pornographic blue movie has plenty of sex comedies that present the same image. The smugglers' shops in Flora Fountain stock blue movies along with hairdryers, cameras and imported sunglasses. The Indian censor with his fogged up glasses and rusty scissors can only watch as his fantasy utopia of non-sexuality is overrun by images from the West. The Indian censor is within us all. He has a permanent home in our brains, nestled somewhere between our cerebrum and the medulla oblongata. He is the black-robed priest with a crucifix, the Bhagvad Gita and the Koran. He manifests himself in intangible forms. He is our sensibility, our shame, our guilt and our hypocrisy.

The Indian teenager is a product of the media. Much of what I do, the way I dress and behave is dictated by twisted visions of Bombay's advertisers and film makers. I am not sure how much the permissive sexuality in ads and films is a result of my behaviour or how much my behaviour has been altered by the media. The end result is that I, the Indian teenager, am more comfortable with the idea of sex and not the actual act itself.

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The change in ideals has had a visible effect on the teenage girl. I have confused ideas about female sexuality. Woman is the personification of mother and whore. She is the virgin with a thousand children. I put her on a pedestal and bow before her virtue while trying to look up her sari. The Indian female is first a mother, then a woman. I respond to her primarily as a maternal figure nursing on her breast. I am therefore an unwitting victim of the 'mamma's boy' syndrome. I am unable to free myself from her womb and remain suspended halfway inside her uterus. The female figure in traditional Indian dramas and films that I see is a virtuous asexual figure. I have denied her sexuality because it makes her a figure too powerful in our male-dominated society.

The vagina is the creator and the destroyer. All life starts from it and it shelters, protects and ultimately destroys. The penis is in contrast but an odd shaped, crude anatomical instrument that, when flaccid, is comical. Freud mentions penis envy but never suggests that perhaps it is the male who yearns for the ultimate power: the power to create life which lies only in the woman.

The Indian woman has been subdued by male insecurity. However, the image is slowly changing and the film industry has responded by killing off the vamp. The heroine now drinks,

smokes and has sex. The Indian teenage girl is also educated. She has been exposed to the West either directly or indirectly through the media. She perceives herself as more than just the mother figure in a demure white salwar-kameez. She is aware of her own sexuality. She may choose to flaunt it or keep it hidden under layers of cotton but she is aware of it. She has been given the power to choose. She is no longer completely subjugated by the society mandate.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to female liberation is the TIM, the Typical Indian Male. Not the fat paan-chewing, dhoti-clad Brahmin with his copy of the Gita tucked under his shirt. Nor the leering villain from the Hindi movie screen. Nor the typical male chauvinistic pig. These are caricatures that the Indian woman can now laugh at. The typical Indian male is far from subtle. He may be a Levis-clad, Maruti-driving disco operator but his ideas are far from the liberal facade that he presents. He is enmeshed in the traditional belief that men are the dominating force. He is not overtly chauvinistic but he instinctively wants a girlfriend who is both a virgin and a whore. The modern TIM is the product of an incomplete sexual revolution, a confused individual unable to come to terms with the changing attitudes yet clamouring for more change. The teenage TIM is only the tangible negative revolution that has been started and then impeded by conservative values.

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The Indian teenager is in a precarious position. He is poised to fly with broken wings. He will soar for a moment, gliding on the warm wind from the West. Then he will fall, his bones meeting stony ground, and he will never fly again. The teenager must have a girlfriend or a boyfriend. It gives him or her a temporary sense of belonging. The days of sitting under trees or taking walks on Worli sea-face are gone. Nowadays

courtship takes place behind locked doors when the parents are out. Or in a parked car on Nariman Point.

**Making Out:** a generic term given to any physical activity that extends beyond chaste kissing. Making out is more than a private illicit sexual release in a secluded spot. First, the couple does not usually have sex, but indulge in fondling and caressing. Heavy breathing and hand roaming goes on until the girl responds. Her inbuilt conservative reaction says ‘stop’. Apologies ensue and the drive home begins. Second, making out is considered to be an important part of a relationship. There is an enormous social pressure to ‘make out’. Not to do so is considered prudish. The problem arises because a couple is supposed to make out but not to cross the line beyond which the girl is considered to be a slut or easy. The Indian teenage girl, despite her apparent liberation, is expected to enjoy ‘making out’ even while she resists the urge to cross that crucial line. Behind the new facade, Indian girls still consider sex to be acceptable only after marriage.

The Indian teenager, therefore, resorts to elaborate lies in an effort to maintain the image that the media creates and forces him to maintain. Girls lie about how far they have gone to protect their reputation. They gossip about the sexual adventures of their friends with expressions of shock and disgust, even though they have been doing the same things. The veil hides their blushing faces while preventing them from confronting the truth about their awakening sexuality. The boys lie from a different motive. While girls invent an elaborate ruse to hide their sexuality, boys choose to enhance theirs by exaggeration. Do not begrudge us our lies. We do so out of a need to fulfil conflicting ideologies—one conservative, another liberal, and we are caught between the two, unwilling to accept one or the other. The veil is, thus, our only security. Ignorance keeps us in bliss, preventing us from choosing whether to be traditional or modern. The thin piece of cloth

wrapped around our eyes prevents introspection or difficult thoughts that might intrude upon our comfortable world and force us to choose. For the moment ambiguity or hiding behind the veil is our best defence.



The  
Indian  
Woman

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Khushwant Singh



## The Indian Woman



One evening while sitting in the lobby of a big hotel which had a large foreign clientele, I was accosted by a cousin who ran a taxi service. He was a lot younger than I and was usually very deferential towards me. This evening he was high on liquor and forgot himself. ‘Veerjee (elder brother), you have been all over the world and must have fucked lots of foreign women. I have never been beyond Delhi, Agra and Jaipur and I bet I’ve fucked more foreigners than you have,’ he said.

I was not willing to take the bet with him. Nevertheless he proceeded to narrate his conquests in the five-star hotels of the three cities between which he plied his taxis. ‘Europeans of all countries, Americans, Canadians, South Americans, Arabs, Filipinos, Indonesians—I have fucked all of them. I haven’t had much luck with the Chinese and Japanese because they come with their husbands or other relatives. But before I am through with this business I will have bedded women of

every nationality in the world. And never paid a single *naya* paisa for it. On the contrary they give me Scotch, ball-point pens, colognes, silk ties. Now what do you think of that?’

‘Wonderful!’ I replied. ‘You should have your name entered in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.’

He had not heard of *Guinness*. ‘You put this in books you write. I can tell more about women than anyone else in India.’

‘I am sure you can,’ I replied. ‘But you did not choose these women; they must have chosen you. Did you ever say no to anyone who was old or ugly?’

He paused over the question before he answered. ‘You are right. But when a woman lays herself before you, you have to be a *hijda* (eunuch) or a *nipunsik* (one who is impotent) to say no. I concede most women I’ve bedded were middle-aged—bored with their husbands, divorced or widowed. What’s the difference? Once you are on top of them, they are all the same. Old or young, with big boobs or mosquito bites, plain or beautiful, there is not much difference. Don’t you agree?’

I refused to be drawn into an argument on details. ‘What about Indian women?’ I asked him. ‘Have you sampled all of them: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsies, Christians, Brahmins, Bengalans, Madrasans, Kashmirans, Shudras, Tribals?’

He was shocked by my question. ‘Veerjee, I regard Indian women as my mothers and sisters. They are chaste and not like those foreigners who will spread their legs wide before any male.’

The friend I was waiting for arrived and I took leave of my cousin. One day I will take down detailed notes of his exploits with foreign women and turn them into a sleazy novel. But the more I thought over his observations the more I was convinced that his notion that Indian females are a species apart from other females of the world was commonly shared by most Indians. It is a myth created and perpetuated by Indian males.

Biologically all women are the same. Every nationality has its quota of nymphomaniacs, lesbians and the sexually frigid. Given the opportunity and guarantees that their illicit relations with men will not get known, they are as willing to indulge in them as women of other nationalities.

Indians are great ones for believing in stereotypes: Hindu women are cold and chaste; Muslim, Sikh and tribal women are hot and often promiscuous. A good bit of belief in stereotypes is based on the *Kamasutra*—perhaps the most asinine ancient text on sexology that exists. Its learned author, the sage Vatsyayana, proclaims that men and women can be divided into three categories according to the sizes and depths of their genitals. Thus women are divided into does, mares or she-elephants. Their appetites for sex vary accordingly. A doe is best matched with a hare, a mare with a bull, a she-elephant with a horse. All other combinations and permutations will be unfulfilling. Their body odours are different and they make different kinds of noises when they climax. Thus if the sage Vatsyayana is to be believed, the women of Maharashtra love to practice the sixty-four arts (*chatushshasti*) of love-making. The women of Andhra Pradesh use crude and lascivious words during the sex act and delight in being abused and addressed lasciviously. They are capable of having repeated orgasms and are indefatigable lovers.

The women of Bihar are like those of Maharashtra but are more secretive. The women of Tamil Nadu are very placid. No matter how much a man may caress their *yonis* or how hard he may copulate, they remain dry and have a very slow and brief orgasm. Punjabi women are passionately fond of oral intercourse (*auparistaka*) And so on. Such categorization is absolute hogwash. There is no basis whatsoever for making these divisions. *Hastinis* (she-elephants) can be frigid; *Padminis* (does or lotuses) can be lusty. The simple truth is that both males and females, if they are in good health, have

healthier appetites for sex than those who are anaemic or frail.

Those who have lived abroad will vouch for the fact that Indian women are no different from Indian men in giving expression to their sexual desires. If anything they are less choosy than white women and leave the first move to be made by men. On my first sojourn in England as a student I had plenty of opportunities to see Indian girls demolish the *Sati-Savitri* image. On board the ship I travelled by was a lady student from Allahabad, a Kashmiri distantly related to the Nehrus. She was forever sermonizing to us on the need to behave like India's ambassadors abroad. When she heard that some boys had visited brothels in Port Said, she gave all of us a dressing down. A few months later I happened to be in a pub deep in the heart of New Forest. One night, after I returned from my dinner, from the balcony of my room I saw this lady come to the pub with a young Englishman. They entered their names in the guest register as man and wife. However, this escapade did not dampen her enthusiasm for sermonizing to others on principles of morality. When it comes to physical and emotional needs, all that differentiates Indian from foreign women are the passports they carry.

Why all discussions about women should begin and end with sex is yet another instance of the male obsession that there is little else to women besides being sex objects. The women's lib movement in the West has pretty well knocked out that illusion cherished by generations of males. The same process is taking place in India where males have been pampered and women grossly discriminated against from the dawn of history to this day.

Even before the advent of Islam from which one can date the custom of putting women in purdah, women were largely treated as objects of pleasure for men or as wily seductresses. The most popular classics in Indian mythology and fables like the *Panchatantra* tales and *Katha Sarit Sagara* are of men

performing austerities including abstinence from sex and acquiring magical powers to reduce their adversaries to ashes. These men were invariably depicted as being short-tempered and their curses irreversible. Their destructive powers could only be diluted if they succumbed to feminine charms. Beautiful women, usually *apsaras* or courtesans, well-versed in the art of seduction (the conventional sixty-four) were sent by rivals to distract them from their meditation. The seductresses always succeeded in their mission. The loss of *bindu* (semen) deprived male celibates of their superhuman powers; ergo, women were beautiful witches and should be kept at a distance.

As if to compensate them for depicting them as inferior beings there grew a parallel body of classical literature portraying them as goddesses; they were *pativratas* (loyal to their husbands) even if their husbands had harems or cheated on them. The paradigm of Hindu womanhood was Sita who went into voluntary exile with her husband, resisted all attempts by Ravana to seduce her, and when suspected of marital disloyalty by her husband, let herself be swallowed up by Mother Earth. The *pativrata* woman stayed loyal to her husband to the very last, voluntarily immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It made no difference that very little of this was true; that women who fasted and prayed for their husbands on *Karva Chauth*, worshipped them as *pati-dev* (husband-god) could also cheat on them or nag them to desperation. Not that the kind of loyalty expected of women was ever expected of men—no man ever immolated himself on his wife's funeral pyre but promptly took another woman as a replacement. This pattern has got so deeply embedded in our minds that even to this day, when a married woman fed up with her husband's ill treatment or that of her mother-in-law decides to put an end to her life, it is not by consuming poison, hanging herself or jumping into a well but usually by dousing

herself in petrol or kerosene and setting herself alight. At the back of her mind is the feeling that burning to death is like committing sati.

Between the cities of India and its 5,50,000 villages, and between its elegant, educated ladies who grace the Lok Sabha and the vast majority of Indian women, yawns the gulf of many centuries. The lives of the latter have not changed very much with the passage of time. Those whose mothers and grandmothers always enjoyed a certain degree of liberty still enjoy it. Women of southern India, for example, Kerala, are more advanced than women in other parts of India because regional matriarchal traditions remain prevalent. In general, women of the lower castes and income groups have greater freedom than higher-caste, middle-income women—as they have had in the past. And those whose female ancestors were cloistered in the zenana remain cloistered in the zenana. Though the Constitution guaranteed women legal equality, they are still subject to humiliating extra-legal restrictions.

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Yet the lot of Indian women has not always been hard and subservient. On the contrary, our early pre-Aryan female ancestors enjoyed a licence that would shock the avant-garde of today. They wore nothing above the waist and the barest minimum below it. They drank strong liquor, danced till the early hours of the morning and were not inhibited in their sexual relations. It was more common for a woman to have four or five husbands than for a man to have a harem of women. They owned property because the society was matriarchal. Today in India, these poor, illiterate, jungle-dwelling Adivasis number about fifty million; traces of their way of life can still be found among the aboriginal tribes in the hills and jungles stretching from Assam in the north-east to Cape Comorin in

the south, as well as among the Dravidians in the south.

Aryans, who started coming to India about 3000 BC at first accepted this pattern of life. In their great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, a king, unable to impregnate his queen, persuades her to seek the service of other men as sanctioned by ancient tradition. Women in olden days were not immured within their houses, nor were they dependent on their husbands and yet they were not considered sinful, for that was the sanctioned custom of the age.

Given this state of affairs the notion of paternity was of little importance; bastardy carried no stigma. ‘Attending on an honoured guest’ was enjoined as a part of hospitality. This freedom continued up to the period of the *Rig Veda* (circa 1500 BC) which writes of women as equals of men, participating in debates, in the performance of religious rituals and in pleasures of wine and the flesh.

The change in female status came soon afterwards. First, polyandrous intercourse was stopped. Pronounced the sage Uddalaka Swetaketu: ‘One woman can make love to one man only . . . If a woman is unfaithful to her husband, from today onward it will be a sin.’

Then followed the denigration of woman to a mere producer of children—like a field producing crops. If she bore sons, she was partly redeemed; but if she had daughters, she could be legitimately cast aside and her female offspring destroyed as weeds. Woman became unclean (‘Below her navel a woman is always unclean,’ says the *Atharva Veda*) and an instrument of the devil to tempt good men from the path of righteousness. According to *Maitreyani Samhita*: ‘Woman is on par with dice and drink, a major social evil, the spirit of untruth, the genius of darkness.’

The chief apologist for lowering the status of women was the famous lawgiver, Manu. He wrote, ‘When creating them, the lord of creatures allotted to women a love of their beds, of

their ornaments; impure thoughts, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.' Manu emphasized woman's secondary role in life. 'From the cradle to the grave a woman is dependent on a male; in childhood on her father, in youth on her husband, in old age on her son.'

Manu prescribed early marriage—between the ages of eight and ten—for girls and pronounced a curse on parents in whose home an unmarried girl attained puberty. He also declared that a married woman could own no property. 'Three persons—a wife, a son and a slave—are declared by law to have no wealth exclusively their own. Their wealth belongs to whom they belong.'

Manu was also responsible for the deification of the husband. 'Whether a drunkard, leper, sadist or wife-beater, a husband is to be worshipped as God,' he wrote. The husband-god concept caught on. 'Having offered adoration to the mind-born divinity, let the wife worship her husband with ornaments, flowers and raiment, thinking all the time, "This is the God of Love,"' states a religious work.

Sati—the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of the husband—was the next logical downward step women were forced to take.

Gautama Buddha, in the fifth century BC, disapproved of child marriage and Sati but did little to ameliorate the sorry state of Indian womanhood. The Buddha's emphasis on celibacy made women appear as the seducer of good men.

*'Do not see womankind,' enjoined the Buddha.*

*'But if we see women, what are we to do?' asked his chief disciple.*

*'Abstain from speech.'*

*'But if they speak to us, then what are we to do?'* persisted the disciple.

*'Keep wide awake,' warned the Wise One.*

By the beginning of the Christian era, the practice of destroying female children at birth, infant marriage, polygamy, prostitution, mass burning of widows on defeat in war had all become common, with the sanction of the Hindu religion.

And worse was yet to come. Muslims began invading India in about AD 1000 and ruled large parts of the country for the next 700 years. Although Islamic law entitled a woman to own property and to divorce her husband, most Hindus who were converted to Islam continued to observe their own customs; property and divorce remained the prerogative of the male. Muslims also introduced the institution of purdah, the veil, and seclusion of women in harems. The Hindus of the upper classes imitated the Muslim rulers by incarcerating their women in the zenana.

The poorer classes treated widows as an abomination. Their heads were shaved, they were not allowed to wear jewellery and could dress only in the plainest white. Even the sight of a widow was believed to bring bad luck. Many were forced into beggary or prostitution either in the brothels or attached to temples as Devadasis (Servants of the Lord). To this day the word in Hindustani for a widow and a prostitute is the same: *raand*.

Change for the better came with British rule. A small band of enlightened Indians supported the British reformers against orthodox Hindu reactionaries. In 1829 the Viceroy, Lord William Bentinck, outlawed Sati. His chief supporter was Raja Rammohun Roy, who had seen his own brother's widow forced on to her husband's funeral pyre. Remarriage of widows was legalized in 1856. Even so, it was as late as in 1929 that a law was passed prohibiting the marriage of children.

The big breakthrough came in the 1920s under the inspired leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Women by the thousands joined the passive resistance movement, including many women leaders of today—and, of course, Indira Gandhi.

Education was given top priority. Two reformers, the Theosophists, Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, were responsible for founding many women's organizations of which the most active today are the All India Women's Conference and the Federation of University Women.

Jawaharlal Nehru carried the process of women's emancipation to its current stage, against the wishes of the majority of Hindus. More than anyone else, he was responsible for the clause in the Constitution which guarantees that 'the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on ground of race, caste, sex, place of birth.' In 1955 polygamy was outlawed, and after 2,000 years the right of divorce was restored to Hindu women. In 1956 Hindu women were given equal property rights.

Nehru also pressed women into political life. By law, every village council must have a woman member. The Congress party and, following its lead, the opposition parties, set up a quota of women candidates for election. In the last general elections, forty per cent of the 150 million eligible women voters cast their ballots. Today there are fifty-six women in the Indian Parliament as compared with fifty-four in the United States Congress.

India has more women in important positions than any other country in the world. But it would be wrong to deduce that the women in India are more emancipated than women of other countries. Except in the top layers of society the pattern has not changed very much, and fewer than ten per cent of Indian women can read or write.

Among minority communities, Parsi women are almost European in their way of life. Christians (roughly twenty million) and Sikhs (approximately fourteen million) have not inherited anti-feminist traditions; their women are more educated than Hindu women and are better represented, for example, in the nursing and teaching professions.

As a matter of fact the woman of today is in every respect superior to her male counterpart in different strata of society. They are born healthier and, despite being fed on the leftovers of their brothers, outlive them. Given equal chances at school and university they do better in their examinations than male students but being biologically smaller and weaker cannot compete with males in sports and activities where physical strength is at premium. Being solely responsible for bearing and nursing children, women have less time at their disposal than men to cultivate the arts or rise in their professions. If only scientists could evolve methods of making men pregnant and being able to nurse children, we may see the emergence of a new race of women wholly superior to men.



Conclusion:  
Everybody  
Needs  
Sex

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Khushwant Singh & Shobha Dé



# Everybody Needs Sex



SOME OF OUR ANCIENTS OFTEN compared comely women to a table-spread of delicacies, a gourmet's feast. Others went ecstatic over their looks. The classic example of the latter is from *The Song of Solomon*:

*Behold, thou art fair, my love;  
behold thou art fair; thou hast  
doves' eyes within thy locks: thy  
hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount  
Gilead.*

*Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.*

*Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.*

*Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.*

*Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.*

*Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.*

*Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.*

Attitudes towards women underwent a change when they began to question the male monopoly in the professions, sciences, arts and literature. Misogynists, among whom the German political philosopher Nietzsche was one, proclaimed: ‘When a woman becomes a scholar there is usually something wrong with her sexual organs.’ To the likes of him ‘woman was God’s second mistake’. Women were meant to stay in their kitchens to cook, feed and look after their families. Later, somewhat grudgingly, men conceded that they could also become schoolteachers (not professors in colleges), nurses (not doctors) and secretaries (never managers). Poet-novelist G. K. Chesterton summed up this male chauvinist attitude: ‘Twenty million young women rose to their feet with the cry *we will not be dictated to* and promptly became stenographers.’

The next step was grudging admission that men did not understand women because they were a species apart from them. But attitudes had only marginally changed. There were still such perceptions of women: as the only people who understand women are women. Men have sight; women have insight. Women are wiser than men because they know less and understand more. And so on. They continued to be treated as sex objects.

'Here's to woman!' toasted Ambrose Bierce. 'Would that we could fall into her arms without falling into her hands . . . '

Or as the actor, John Barrymore, said: 'The trouble with life is that there are so many beautiful women—and so little time.'

But ever since women got full franchise and formed more than half the voters in democratic countries, ambitious politicians were quick to learn the advantages of being pro-woman. President Lyndon B. Johnson proclaimed, 'I wish to make a policy statement. I am unabashedly in favour of women.'

Today, women no longer accept condescension from men. Given the same opportunities they can do as well if not better than men in every field of activity. This was aptly summed up by Charlotte Whilton, first Lady Mayor of Ottawa: 'Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought of half as good. Luckily this is not difficult.'

In this anthology you have a fair sampling of writings by both men and women regarded as experts in their respective fields. Contrary to Nietzsche's forebodings, and despite their unquestioned skills as writers of eminence, our women contributors remain lovely-looking without suffering any damage to their sexual organs. The debate might have become livelier if we had had some women-haters on the panel of anthologists but even as it stands, it should give the reader a fair idea of the passions the issue of sex raises among both the sexes. What is to be welcomed is the fact that in today's India these issues are being discussed with a frankness seldom seen in the past. And as everyone is interested in sex, it can only benefit all of us if more of us are open about it.

In a recent Hollywood film, the slightly drunk heroine—a single white female—turns to her equally drunk male companion and asks fuzzily, ‘Tell me—why is sex such a barrier between man-woman friendships?’ A good question. One that Indian women have been asking down the ages. The name of the film? *Man Trouble*. Could it have been anything else?

Four years ago, I did a short stint as an ‘Agony Aunt’ for a leading Sunday paper. It was an illuminating experience. Nearly fifteen years earlier, I used to ghost-write a similar column for a popular actress for a youth magazine. The letters then were all about unrequited love, pimple problems and mother-in-law trouble. But the mail I received for my last bash at solving the world’s myriad emotional problems was something else. The letters were predominantly about sex, penis length, breast sizes, masturbation, anal intercourse, homosexual sex, group sex, adulterous sex, teenage sex and just plain sex-sex. There were letters voicing despair and frustration along with hope and liberation. Curious letters. Amusing letters. Desperate letters. The real surprise for me was that the male-female ratio turned out to be almost perfectly balanced. The tone of the letters was interesting too. Women readers tended to rage on about the raw deals they were receiving in the sex department while the poor men sounded like whipped boys unable to come to terms with the ‘unreasonable’ demands being made on them by their wives or girlfriends. This is where my own ‘female empathy’ factor crept in. I dealt with the male letter writers summarily, perfectly happy to wear my prejudice on my sleeve. I’d advise the men to shape up, sharpen their acts, tune in to the needs of their women, while I’d breezily tell the women to go ahead and refuse to put out if they didn’t feel like it.

For the first time in perhaps centuries, the Indian woman is saying that her body is her own, that she has a right over it,

that it is not just a baby-making machine. This realization has triggered off a quiet revolution—Indian women are no longer lying back and not enjoying it. Increasingly, they are refusing to hand over the use of their bodies to men unwilling to recognize a woman's unilateral claim over her physical self. And the female orgasm continues to remain one of life's biggest mysteries (has she or hasn't she? Only she can tell for sure), more and more women are discovering, even seeking real pleasure out of a liaison that was once considered no more than a painful duty. They are actually beginning to enjoy marital sex. The myth of the multiple orgasm has still to be exploded (I know of just one woman who claims to experience it regularly and I think she's saying it just to make the rest jealous).

There is no denying the new glasnost where the subject of sex is concerned. More people are discussing it today than ever before. More articles have been written on the subject during the past two years than in the last decade. Television talk shows discuss hitherto taboo topics such as pre-marital sex and child abuse with the naturalness that was previously reserved for 'family subjects' such as caring for the aged or small-scale investments. Women's magazines have dropped traditional inhibitions regarding sexual matters and brazenly carry bold advice columns that deal with the problem of premature ejaculation with as much matter-of-factness previously employed for subjects such as menstrual cramps and pre-natal stress in the past. The old coyness has been replaced by a brand new brassiness that confronts delicate bodily matters head on.

Cunnilingus is a term that is now equally familiar to readers of these publications as crochet once was. The few magazines targeted at men also strive to go beyond the badly-photographed pin-ups and rottenly-written short stories to talk about real problems faced by real men. Penis length continues

to dominate the question-and-answer sections, but there is also the occasional article that discusses menopausal dilemmas in men and women for instance, in fairly serious terms.

These recent ‘winds of change’ have enough detractors to keep them from turning into tempests. Conservative elements huff and puff in outrage as bastions continue to fall. Ruffled religious sentiments are often trotted out to reform the misguided masses and get them to return to the path of purity and righteousness, and self-styled moralists thunder away on television about the evils of Westernization quite forgetting that the worst examples of sexual abuse, child prostitution and disease can be found next door in Bangkok or Kathmandu. And that the brothels of Bombay are teeming with under-age HIV positive prostitutes still plying their trade not knowing that they are living on borrowed time.

The very fact that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three-letter-word in India, is enough cause to celebrate. One generally fears what one does not know with ignorance levels rapidly dropping, chances are we will walk into a new era of enlightened, evolved sexual relations. ‘The act’ in future may well be viewed as something more meaningful than mere mating or animal copulation with only propagation of the species in mind. It is to such a hope that we dedicate this book.

To bring this book to a conclusion I should mention an exchange I had with one of the women I spoke to for the book. I’d lived with the book for over six months at that point, months in which I had to live with the ‘voices’ of these various women ringing in my head. This woman, reflecting the views of some others, said to me tiredly, ‘Sex . . . who needs it?’

I hated to tell her this but I had to: ‘Everybody, darling, everybody.’

## Notes on the Contributors

SHOBHA DÉ was born in 1948, in Maharashtra. She was educated in Delhi and Bombay, and graduated from St. Xavier's College, Bombay, with a degree in psychology. She began her career in journalism in 1970, and was the founder-editor of three popular magazines—*Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*—as well as the Consulting Editor to *Sunday* and *Mega City*. She has written four best-selling novels—*Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession*.

INDRANI AIKATH-GYALTSEN was born in 1952, in Chaibasa, Bihar. She went to school in Jamshedpur and later moved to New York City where she studied at Barnard College in Columbia University. She lives at present in Darjeeling where, besides being a housewife and a freelance journalist, she owns and runs a hotel. She has two novels to her credit—*Daughters of the House* and *Cranes' Morning*.

RINKI BHATTACHARYA was born in 1942, in Calcutta. She began her career as a freelance journalist at the age of twenty-four, and has written columns for the *Times of India*, the *Economic Times*, the *Indian Express* and other

publications. She switched to making documentary films and made a debut with *Char Divari*, a film that deals with the issue of wife-beating. A sequel to this is a film on related issues of violence against women. Involved with the women's movement, she is a visiting lecturer on the media and women's issues at St. Xavier's, Sophia College, etc. She is currently involved with collecting essays for two books: the first is on fathers, the second on motherhood. Rinki Bhattacharya is on the panel of producers for Films Division India as well as a member of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (Stockholm).

INDIRA JAISING was born in 1940 in Bombay. She went to school in Bombay and graduated from Bangalore. Subsequently, she studied law in Bombay and received her degree in 1962. In 1969–1970 she went on a fellowship to the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London. She was a visiting scholar at the Columbia School of Law in 1988. She is the secretary of the Lawyers Collective, an organization which is involved with providing for the unmet legal needs of the underprivileged sections of society. In 1986, she became the founder-editor of *The Lawyers*, a monthly magazine on law and social justice. She has argued several public interest cases relating to discrimination against women, the Muslim Personal Law, rights of pavement dwellers and the homeless, and has been providing legal services to the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

PRAKASH KOTHARI is a professor and head of the department of Sexual Medicine of G. S. Medical College and K. E. M. Hospital, Bombay. The title 'Sexologist of Asia' was conferred upon him by the Asian Federation for Sexology, Shanghai. He was also called 'Man of the Year' in the field of sex by the World Association for Sexology at Caracas,

Venezuela. Dr Kothari has treated more than 33,000 cases of sexual dysfunction and written two books—*Common Sexual Problems* and *Orgasm—New Dimensions*.

MULK RAJ ANAND was born in 1905, in Peshawar (now in Pakistan). He studied at the Universities of Lahore, London and Cambridge. He lived in England for many years before settling down in India. Many of his novels have been translated into other languages and some of the well-known and widely read are: *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), and the much acclaimed *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953). His autobiographical novels are: *Seven Summers* (1950), *Morning Face* (1968) which won the National Academy Award, *Confession of a Lover* (1972) and *The Bubble* (1988).

M. F. HUSAIN was born in 1915, in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. He left home at an early age and started his career in art by painting hoardings in Bombay having had very little formal education in art. He has played a major role in the contemporary art movement. In the Forties he was a member of the Progressive Artists Group which broke from both the traditional and Western styles of art, and was the key movement in the formation of modern Indian art. Husain got his break when he met Kali Pundole, who started one of India's first art galleries and was the first to exhibit his work. Pundole was instrumental in helping Husain to establish himself in the West. Husain's art has gone through many phases, from the figurative to the abstract and back to the figurative, as he commented on many political events, portraying Indira Gandhi's Emergency, Mother Teresa, the Bhopal gas tragedy, and communalism. Besides being the highest-selling artist in India,

he has always been a controversial figure because of the several 'events' he has 'staged'—while many have criticized him for indulging in what they called gimmickry, others have felt that these 'events' were perfectly justified forms of artistic expression.

MAHESH BHATT was born in 1948, in Bombay, into a family of film makers. He dropped out of college in 1970 and directed his first feature film in Hindi at the age of twenty-one. He has twenty-one films to his credit, including the well-known *Arth* and *Saaraansh*. He is currently the editor of a video film magazine and has written one book—*U. G. Krishnamurti: A Life*.

FRANK SIMOES was born in 1937, in Bombay, and studied in St. Mary's School, Bombay. After completing high school he started his career in writing when the *Times of India* published his first article. He was published fairly regularly after that in the leading dailies and magazines of Bombay. At the age of nineteen he got a job as a deckhand on a Japanese freighter and travelled to Genoa; subsequently, he spent a year doing many kinds of odd jobs in Europe, and spent six months in London. On returning to Bombay he joined Ogilvy & Mather (then S. H. Benson [Advertising] Ltd.) as a copy trainee, and ten years later was called to the Board. After three years as a director, he left and started FSA (Frank Simoes Advertising Private Ltd.) running it successfully for twenty years. He has written columns for *Society* and the *Sunday Times* and now writes full-time. His first book, *Fare Forward Voyager*, a biography of the Goan industrialist, Vasudev Salgaocar, was published two years ago to nationwide critical acclaim. He is currently working on two books—one on Goa and the other on his life and times in Indian advertising.

ASHOK ROW KAVI was born in 1947, in Bombay. He graduated from the University of Bombay with an honours degree in Chemistry. Subsequently, he dropped out of an engineering college and switched to theology. He acquired a post-graduate diploma in theology from the Ramakrishna order. He started his career as a journalist in 1974 with the *Indian Express*, and was the chief reporter with *The Free Press Journal* from 1984 to 1989. In 1991, he founded *Bombay Dost*, India's first gay magazine. He was a representative at the International AIDS conference in Amsterdam (1992) and was the chairman of the Second International Congress on AIDS.

PURU P. DAS was born in 1973, in Bombay. He was educated first in Mexico and Spain and then graduated from Andover (USA). He subsequently studied for a year at Harrow School (UK) and is currently at Vassar College, New York. Puru Das writes for various publications.

KHUSHWANT SINGH was born in 1915, in Punjab. He was educated at Government College, Lahore, and at King's College and the Inner Temple in London. He practised at the Lahore High Court for several years before joining the Ministry of External Affairs in the Government of India in 1947. He was sent on diplomatic postings to Canada and London and later went to Paris with the UNESCO. He began his career as a journalist in 1951 and has been founder-editor of *Yojana* (1951–1953), editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (1969–1979), editor of the *National Herald* (1978–1979), chief editor of *New Delhi* (1979–1980) and editor of the *Hindustan Times* (1980–1983). He also has several novels to his credit, amongst which are *Delhi* and *Train to Pakistan*, and works of non-fiction on Delhi, nature and current affairs.

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Shobha Dé is the author of several best-selling novels among which are *Socialite Evenings* and *Strange Obsession*; Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen is a freelance journalist and a novelist of worldwide renown—her last novel was *Cranes' Morning*; Rinki Bhattacharya is a women's rights activist and a documentary film-maker, *Char Divari* being the best-known of her films; Indira Jaising is a civil and women's rights lawyer; Prakash Kothari is India's best-known sexologist; Mulk Raj Anand is the author of many internationally acclaimed novels like *Coolie* and *Untouchable*; M. F. Husain is one of India's most famous artists; Mahesh Bhatt is a film-maker of repute with films like *Arth* and *Saaraansh* to his credit; Frank Simoes is a legendary adman; Ashok Row Kavi is a journalist and the founder-editor of *Bombay Dost*; Puru P. Das is a budding writer; Khushwant Singh is India's most widely read journalist and the author of several best-selling novels including *Delhi* and *Train to Pakistan*.

The jacket and inside illustrations were drawn specially for the book by M. F. Husain.

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T H E C O N T R I B U T O R S

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Shobha De on Indian men • Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen on marriage • Rinki Bhattacharya on abandoned women • Indira Jaising on divorce • Prakash Kothari on common sexual problems • Mulk Raj Anand on village sex • M.F. Husain on desire • Mahesh Bhatt on sex in Indian films • Frank Simoes on the perfect pair of breasts • Ashok Row Kavi on Indian homosexuality • Puru P. Das on teenage sex and longing • Khushwant Singh on Indian women •

