



THE abc OF

BEAUTY CONTESTS

For more than thirty years now, we have had annual events aimed to select the most beautiful woman of the year: The Femina Miss India Contests. But the history of these contests is as old as the history of protests against them, their competitive nature and their focus on women as mere bodies. Yet in all these years, the voices for and against such contests have never been as loud as they are this year, on the occasion of the Miss World 1996 contest slated to be held in Bangalore under the aegis of Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd. And there's good reason for it to be so.

On one hand, we are being told that the Indian woman has finally made her mark on the world. And that therefore, we should herald the arrival of this international contest to India with national pride. But on the other hand, the issue of beauty contests cannot be discussed so simplistically. It must be seen in the context of the reality of women's lives. For its re-affirmation of traditional stereotypical images of womanhood. The commodification of women's bodies. And the negation of their real calibre. In addition, we need to look at the role of such contests in the process of economic liberalisation. Their societal impact, and most of all, the risks they pose to the well-being of women.

BEAUTY VS THE BEAUTY BUSINESS



Popular conception has it that any voice against beauty contests is a voice against any kind of beauty itself. But our objection is to such notions of beauty that are defined by patriarchal forces and commercial interests.

Over the ages, dominant notions of feminine 'beauty' in most societies have been oppressive for women, from the foot binding tradition in China to Victorian corsets, and from wired bras to high heels. At the same time, some women have also evolved newer dress styles that are more comfortable and functional. Breaking away from accepted [and expected] norms of make-up, dress, footwear, hairstyles, and developing a new aesthetic.

But in today's context, beauty pageants and their patrons play a critical role in determining mainstream notions of beauty. In this age of international markets, multinational corporations and transcontinental enterprise, it is no accident that today's notion of the beautiful Indian woman is one who meets 'international standards' of height, weight, style and even wit! The pressure on looks and appearance is once again reinforcing the notion of external appearances. It undermines the potential and calibre of women as proved in all other fields. All along, the women's movement has asserted that the image of women is not one of a sex object. The movement continues to work against the commodification of women. But the forces of capitalism and patriarchy that we are pitted against are carrying on a relentless onslaught to woo women as consumers, by reinforcing the image of women as determined by her looks and costly maintenance of her appearance.

That's not all. Such focus on appearance and beauty has helped create a market for a mind boggling range of goods and services - cosmetics, beauty products, low calorie diets, weight loss clinics, beauty devices and cosmetic surgery - leading to the mushrooming of beauty parlours and health clubs in every big colony and small lane. Generating anxiety amongst millions of women as they pursue beauty

along the terms set by an aggressive market. Hence, beauty contests and fashion shows are an ideological tool for market forces. And if the present controversy is anything to judge by, the stakes are obviously very high.

FROM BEAUTY CONTESTS TO PERSONALITY PAGEANTS THE DIFFERENCE IS ONLY SKIN DEEP



From the very beginning, the organisers of beauty contests have had to deal with the criticism that these events reduce women to mere physical objects, to be judged on the basis of their vital statistics, the colour of their skin and hair and the dazzle of their smile. In order to

mitigate the criticisms, such contests are now being called personality pageants. The only difference is that in those days the contestants had to lift their sarees to show their legs to the judges, while now they have the liberty of sashaying down the catwalk in a swimming costume. Obviously, nothing has really changed.

Even as the Miss World contest stands in the thick of a controversy, the newspapers are splashed with advertisements for applicants for Miss India 1997. And the 'requirements' for the so-called personality of the year are "...under 23 years of age, stand not less than 5'6" tall and have the poise and confidence to compete...". Not one word about talents, or IQ or anything else. And even in the actual contests, all that is expected from the contestants are witty

repartees to two or three questions that one would have to answer at any social gathering. And of course it helps if the contestant expresses pseudo-concern for a humanitarian cause, be it destitute children [Sushmita Sen] or elders [Aishwarya Rai], but not a sports stadium [Madhu Sapre]! Yet, they insist that this is a personality contest designed to do justice to the woman of today, the woman of substance!

LIBERALISATION AND THE CONTESTS BEAUTY AND THE BEAST



What is it about the Indian woman in the last few years that she has been able to make such a mark on the international scene? Is it just a coincidence that over the last three years, we have had two Miss Universe Runner-Ups, one Look of the Year, one Miss World and one Miss Universe? It is interesting

to note that unofficial reports from a meeting of Miss Universe Incorporated [the company that holds this event] and the co-sponsors of the event in 1993, indicated that a decision had been arrived at that the winners of the 1995 pageant would be participants from either China or India. Both large developing markets for multinational companies from the first world. Subsequently, Sushmita Sen was the winner of the Miss Universe contest and Aishwarya Rai turned out to be Miss World.

Even the choice of venue for such contests is based on the potential the local market offers. It comes in recognition of the



SOME AMAZING FIGURES

A total expenditure of 12 crores is estimated to be spent on Miss World 1996. Of this amount, ABCL is investing Rs. 7 crores, while title sponsor Godrej is putting up Rs. 5 crores. The estimated earnings from the event are in the region of Rs. 25 crores. Other sponsors include Welcomgroup of Hotels, Motorola, Microland, Frig, Air India and Eureka. Tickets to the event are priced at Rs. 25,000, Rs. 15,000, Rs. 9,000, and Rs. 2,000 each.

At the first press conference for the event, the Karnataka state government had promised to put up Rs. 10 crore. But following the spate of protests against such use of public money, it has gone totally silent on the issue.

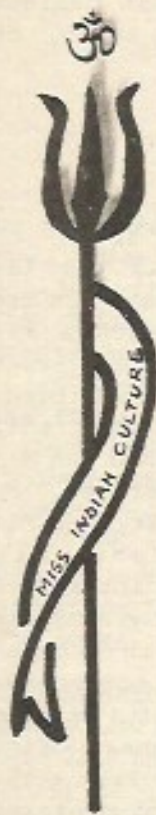
PSEUDO-SAVIOURS OF INDIAN CULTURE:

The Saffron Brigade

Right wing forces have always held women to be repositories of tradition and culture. They are in a panic today because they regard beauty contests a threat to "traditional Indian culture". These self-appointed guardians, the BJP and Shiv Sena, see themselves as the protectors of Indian womanhood. But they not only maintain that 'a woman's place is in the home', they are also responsible for actively promoting oppressive practices like sati. These notions of an ideal are in direct contradiction to any notion of equal rights for women

Right wing opponents to the beauty contest object to 'indecent' and 'exposure' and the thought of women wearing swimsuits. The feminist position however, is against the commodification and objectification of women. It is the commercialisation of women's bodies that is de-humanising, and not 'exposure' per se. After all, a swimsuit is the most convenient garment to go for a swim!

As women, we need to be as cautious of right wing assertions as that of market forces, both of which thrive on the exploitation of women. Our liberation lies in struggling against all such patriarchal forces - whether of the saffron flag or a consumeristic society.



The liberalisation of economy in the nineties has made it easy for companies to create a vast market for cosmetic goods and fashionwear. Foreign and Indian companies, both big and small, are reaching out to women as their consumers. Advertising of these beauty products has similarly reached unprecedented heights. All with the blessings of government policy that reduced excise duty on cosmetics from 120% to 40%. Paving the way for more multinationals to enter the Indian market. Already, Revlon, Oriflame and Bergerac N.C. are a few companies shifting ventures in India.

Last year, in the Femina Miss India 1995 Contest organised by Bennett, Coleman and Company in liason with large corporations, saw an unprecedented level of hype with various parts of women's bodies being thrown into competition, and companies appropriating the limelight by sponsoring the awards. Hence, we had Sunsilk sponsoring Miss Beautiful Hair, Close-up appropriating Miss Beautiful Smile, and Lakme claiming Miss Beautiful Skin while East West Airlines bagged Miss Congeniality. Yet, the organisers and supporters of such events deny the allegation that such events commodify women's bodies, treating parts of their anatomy as objects for sale.

Meanwhile the government, both at the centre and the state, is backing the entire event. Happy to spend public money on the event and have the Prime Minister dine with the contestants. Providing ample distraction and entertainment to the nation, to keep its mind off the realities it is reeling under - increasing unemployment, violence against women, rising prices, and starvation deaths.

BEAUTY QUEENS, CORPORATIONS AND THE STATE SERVICE WITH A SMILE



After all the glory that the organisers of such contests claim to bestow upon the winners, what is shocking is the way they 'use' them in the year that follows. Beauty queens are invariably used to serve the interests of the corporate sector and the state. The most memorable

incident being of Ms Rita Faria, Miss India and Miss World 1966, who was sent to entertain

particular country and its government willing to pursue the policies set by forces of international capitalism. Similar recognition has been given to Brazil, Venezuela and Costa Rica. Hence, it comes as no surprise that shortly after India won the titles of Miss Universe and Miss World, it has become the host of such a mega international event with full support from the Karnataka government and a clearance from the Centre. The stakes are heavy for all concerned, with the Indian government wanting to give positive signs to investors all over the world.

American troops in Vietnam! Emma Knight, Miss USA 1973 and Runner-Up Miss Universe, says in an account '...The minute you are crowned you become their property and subject to whatever they tell you ... From the day I won .. for almost two months, I got a day and a half off. I made about 250 appearances that year. Parades, shopping centres and things. Snip ribbons. What else do you do at a shopping centre?'. Miss Universe Inc., USA literally "owned" Sushmita Sen for that year. It paid her US\$ 50,000 to represent their company. She even attended the UNFPA conference on Population and Development held in Cairo. On her arrival in India she was taken on a chariot in monarchic style. And she was sent to greet Nelson Mandela as a diplomatic envoy. Isn't it amazing that when South Africa was liberated from years of struggle against apartheid, the Indian government found it most fitting to send Miss Universe?

Corporations also do not fail to use the opportunity to capitalise on the success of these women. Sushmita Sen did a massive campaign for Apple Computers in the US, and helped pave the way for Coke in India. While

residential areas in Delhi had Aishwarya Rai arrive at many a doorstep with a Pepsi. It is obvious that the corporate sector, with the aid of a bourgeoisie media orchestrate such events with full state support.

THE MEDIA ALSO DISCOVERS A BEAUTIFUL WAY TO MAKE MONEY



Not only do beauty contests themselves, their attendant publicity and the controversy they generate make great headlines for newspapers and magazines, the entire business of beauty makes good business sense. Today, every leading newspaper and magazine features regular gossip columns on personalities from the field; most of them run 'how to become beautiful / how to stay looking young / how to stay in good shape' columns or features. Essentially, the need to be beautiful is constantly being pushed by the media. Of course, over and above editorial content, most publications or even TV channels thrive

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE ARE SOME UGLY STORIES TOO

It is often argued that participating in a beauty contest is a matter of personal choice for a woman, and therefore any criticism of these contests is an infringement on her rights. But the fact is that personal choice and the guarantee of safety is a privilege of the few. Around Delhi University for example, banners and advertisements often come up announcing a Miss Delhi or a Miss Teenager or a Miss Something-or-the-other contest. The organisers are usually unknown, and the events often followed by dinners and social get-togethers. Those on the look-out for models or ushers or receptionists find these events highly useful. But every once in a while, reports of exploitation surface. Exposing a reality that has nothing to do with the so-called world of the beautiful, rich and famous.

The case of a young woman from Lajpat Nagar who was forced into nude modelling under the threat of gang rape came to light in late 1994. In a state of trauma, she concealed this episode from her family, until a nasty neighbour who came across the picture put it up outside her house. While modelling for clothes for a magazine, she had no idea she would be blackmailed into modelling in the nude and find herself in the daily papers. Shortly after, Delhi Police reported the case of a young teenager who was being used for nude modelling. She kept it to herself until she had a breakdown. It was then that her parents brought the case to the police.

These are only a couple of reported instances from a world full of countless photo studios, sleazy magazines and shady contests.

on advertisements for the entire gamut of products that cater to this so-called need of the people, primarily the women. So much so, that an ordinary buyer is given a choice between ten shampoos - sometimes a herbal shampoo, or sometimes a protein enriched one. The story is the same for all other cosmetic products and beauty services. The creation of consumerist desires in this field has never been as widespread by advertising and the media.

But some publications go much further. Bennet, Coleman and Co., the parent company of the Times of India group, organises the Miss India Contests under the banner of its women's magazine, Femina. Needless to say, at the time of the contests and after the declaration of winners, the entire group's publications go berserk with coverage and publicity. At times like this, all kinds of consumer products and corporations strive to gain mileage from the event. And in the bargain, the media makes a neat packet on advertising revenue.

**THE SOCIETAL IMPACT
BEAUTY BEAUTY EVERYWHERE**



Words can hardly describe the impact of Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai's victories overseas. The entire country went into a euphoria with India's 'arrival on the global map'. But these were not events by themselves. Overnight, beauty, beauty

contests and modelling became aspirations of the middle class. Beauty contests were suddenly being held in schools, colleges, universities, professional institutions and residential colonies. Companies jumped onto the bandwagon, sponsoring events, or even organising them. In some colleges in Delhi University departmental functions to bid farewell to seniors or welcome freshers were centred around these contests. But what is most amazing is that these events now take place not only in the big cities, but also in small towns and mohallas. With parents actually putting in their money to encourage their daughters to emerge the winner. This widespread popularity is concerning, especially because it creates a commercialised, competitive culture where it is no longer enough for a woman to be whatever she is, even talented or successful, unless she also has the looks [or at least the grooming] to match.

The forthcoming beauty contest can become a rallying point for progressive forces to jointly challenge the stereotypical and derogatory treatment of women by patriarchal, capitalist trends. It is crucial to come out strongly and make our voices heard over the cacophony being created by apologists for Indian culture as well as "modernists" claiming to take women into the twenty first century, and collectively create a culture where women can hold their own in society.



Dear Friend,

In order to cover printing and mailing costs of the newsletter, we would appreciate an Annual Subscription of Rs 35/- for Indian subscribers and Rs 120/- for foreign subscribers. Do subscribe and encourage your friends to subscribe.

Name of individual/organisation
.....
Address
.....
Tel./Fax
Mode of payment *Cash / *MO / *DD / *Cheque

All drafts/cheques should be made in favour of Saheli.

VOICES OF RESISTANCE

1968

One of the very first actions of the newly emergent women's liberation movement in the USA was the protest action against the Miss America Pageant of 1968 in Atlantic City.

Thousands of women protested against the image of Miss America, an image that oppressed women in every area it sought to represent them. There were picket lines, guerilla theatre and leafletting. Boycotts were announced of all commercial products related to the pageant. When Miss America was being crowned at midnight, a massive Women's Liberation rally was out on the streets. The live telecast of the pageant was disrupted by the protesters as millions watched on television.

Slogans which emerged at the First Miss World Protest in Britain:

1969

- MIS-FIT REFUSES TO CONFORM
- MIS-CONCEPTION DEMANDS FREE ABORTION FOR ALL WOMEN
- MIS-PLACED DEMANDS A CHANCE TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE

School girls used to set off stink bombs in Kensington High Street boutiques and ring up the press. It was an expression of their anger at the exploitation of women as consumers of fashion.

1970

Four women disrupted the Miss World contest at the Albert Hall in full view of television cameras.

1970

Over a hundred women demonstrated inside the hall of the Miss World contest, throwing stink bombs and shouting the slogan: "We're not beautiful. We're not ugly. We're angry!"

1988

A group of 70 women in Aurangabad surrounded a Rotoract Club sponsored beauty contest and tore off their banners. "A beauty contest is not only an exhibition of a woman's body, but is an insult to her intelligence and self respect."

In May 1994, as the Miss Universe contest was being held in Manila, millions of viewers all over the world saw women protesting against the event. Women activists of GABRIELA, a national federation of women's organisations in the Philippines gheraoed the contest hall, wearing sashes displaying titles like Miss Unemployment, Miss Illiteracy, Miss Poverty etc.

1994

Bailancho Manch militantly protested against the Femina Beauty Contest in Goa. They declared that such beauty contests reduce women to sex objects in order to serve commercial interests. The activists condemned the involvement of the Goa Tourism Department, which for years through its sexist advertising had distorted the image of Goa as a land of "wine and women". The advertising department of the Times of India, one of the organisers, served a legal notice to Bailancho Manch, while Crime Branch policemen did several rounds of activists' houses.

Jan 14
1995

Jan 21
1995

Saheli, along with AIDWA, NFIW, Gender Studies Group (Delhi Univ) and others demonstrated outside the Times Building against the Bennett Coleman and Co. Sponsored Miss India Contest. They strongly condemned the profiteering of companies and newspapers like TOI who are largely responsible for the propagation of the beauty contest culture to promote consumerism. 'Sell products not women', 'Stop commodification of women', were some of the slogans.