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The pleasures and politics of pornography [September 2009](#)

By [Shohini Ghosh](#)

No longer a dark and sleazy secret, pornography demands an examination of the contradictions between our sexual lives and yearnings.

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No longer a dark and sleazy secret, pornography demands an examination of the contradictions between our sexual lives and yearnings.

Recently, the Indian Government blocked the much loved Savita Bhabhi website created by the pseudonymous Deshmukh, Dexter and Mad. The Savita Bhabhi (Savita sister-in-law) site carries a daily cartoon strip about the “Sexual Adventures of the Hot Indian Bhabhi” who is described as a “regular Indian woman who just can’t get enough sex”. In June, the Government of India instructed internet service providers to block the site under Section 67 of the Information Technology Act which prohibits the publication and transmission of “any material which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest” or whose effect could “corrupt and deprave” and certain amended provisions that were included after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. These provisions allow for the censoring of material deemed threatening to the “the sovereignty or integrity of India, defence and security of the state”.



Photo: Karen Haydock

In an age of proliferating hardcore cyberporn, why did the government target a cartoon strip as a ‘moral and national threat’? N.Vijayaditya, the Controller of Certifying Authorities – an agency entrusted under the IT Act to block websites – stated that they had acted on “several complaints” made against the site. The demise (not really, since you can access the site through proxy servers) of India’s best loved bhabhi was mourned by thousands of online admirers. Headlines reported the “Assassination of Savita Bhabhi” and the “Death of India’s First Porn Star”. A Bombay-based rock band dedicated a special song to Savita Bhabhi, while blogs and networking sites launched ‘Save Savita Bhabhi’ campaigns. On the other hand, Savita Bhabhi’s detractors allege that the site denigrated Indian women, insulted ‘Indian family values’ and threatened ‘Indian culture’. Those familiar with censorship debates in India will know that over the last two decades these allegations have recurred with predictable regularity around sexual speech and more particularly around transgressive images of women’s bodies and sexualities. So what precisely is transgressive about Savita Bhabhi?

Savita is an attractive middle class housewife whose dull, workaholic husband is rarely home. Consequently, she has ample time and space for torrid sexual encounters with, among others, a door-to-door lingerie salesman, local teens playing cricket, a former lover visiting from abroad, a potential boss, his secretary, a famous film star (with an uncanny resemblance to Amitabh Bachchan), a newly employed servant, the husband of her husband’s office colleague and a terrorist. As is evident from this brief summary, Savita Bhabhi embodies for the moral purists, the most terrifying ideas about sexual transgression. She is married but not monogamous. She has sex for fun and not for procreation or love and in choosing lovers she does not discriminate on the grounds of class, caste, gender, occupation, age or status. Having had the most outrageous escapades, she gets away with it all.

Out and away

With her long, dark hair and voluptuous body, Savita Bhabhi invokes the sensual female protagonists of popular calendar art and the children’s comic books series Amar Chitra Katha, with stories from history and mythology. Predominantly Hindu in its theme and iconography, these comic books feature stories of goddesses, queens, princesses and wives whose sexualised bodies are restrained by their monogamous, dutiful and moral dispositions. Savita Bhabhi has inherited the body and discarded the temperament.

That Savita is referred to as ‘bhabhi’ is no less ironic. Idealised as a maternal figure to the devar (the husband’s younger brother), the bhabhi has also been the object (and subject) of erotic desire. Literature and films in India are replete with references to the desired and desiring sister-in-law. This theme finds powerful expression in Satyajit Ray’s widely acclaimed film Charulata (The Lonely Wife, 1964). While researching for the film in Santiniketan (the film being adapted from a story by Rabindranath Tagore), Ray found references to Tagore’s own relationship to his sister-in-law. Sooraj R Barjatya’s 1991 Bombay blockbuster Hum Aapke Hain Koun?! also places the figure of the bhabhi within this tension.

Arousing sexual excitement and moral anxiety with equal ease, Savita Bhabhi straddles both continuity and change. The pleasures mobilised by the series have to do with watching explicit hardcore scenes as well as knowing that some others, particularly the husband, cannot or must not look. In one episode Savita and her husband are invited to an office colleague’s house for dinner. She ends up having sex with the colleague’s husband in the kitchen while their respective spouses sit and chat in the very next room. Indeed, the tension between ‘what can be seen’ and ‘what should not be seen’ constitute much of the lure and seduction of the banned series. The dangers of being ‘found out’ haunt both the sexual dissident as well as the dissident spectator of porn.

There is a dearth of reliable information about porn in India. Those who confidently provide figures are usually anti-porn crusaders and their sources are either undisclosed or unverifiable. However, those who keep track will know that porn sells widely and is highly diverse in its content. While pirate markets are flooded with ‘international porn’ there is also a diversified market for local porn in regional languages. Some successful porn films

cross over to regions other than that of their origin. One such porn video is Mysuru Mallige (Mysore Jasmine) which had record sales in Karnataka, with several versions of the film becoming available both online and offline.

The weekly magazine India Today conducts an annual sex survey in collaboration with AC Nielsen - ORG MARG. The survey of 2008 provides interesting insights into the sexual lives of Indian people. Responding anonymously, men and women from four metros and six major cities provide frank testimonies about their sex lives thereby signalling a clear decline in conventional inhibitions and a greater openness to a range of sexual practices that lie outside marriage, monogamy and heterosexuality. The survey shows that hitherto taboo topics like queer sexuality, extramarital relationships and pornography are fast tumbling out of the closet.

The findings on pornography are particularly compelling. According to the survey, 3 out of every 5 men and 1 out of every 5 women "approved" of pornography. It is worth noting that 45 percent of the women who watched porn claimed that it had inspired them to become sexually inventive. Video seems to be the most popular format for porn consumption, with the largest constituency of its patrons being located in Calcutta (86 percent) followed by Bangalore (79 percent). Interestingly, the study also claims that 1 out of every 4 women who watch porn in Bangalore admitted to having made their own porn videos. It would seem therefore that women are not only consumers of porn but producers as well. It must however be understood that home porn is most often produced not for public circulation but sexual sharing within intimate spaces. Internationally though, more and more real-life couples, both straight and queer, are consenting to participate in porn videos meant for public circulation.

Beyond 'harm'

Women's relationship to porn has been the subject of much discussion. The Feminist debate on pornography has a contentious history in the West. The anti-porn position, inspired by the writings of American feminists Robin Morgan and Susan Brownmiller, argues that pornography is material which depicts violence against women and is itself violence against women thereby drawing a straight line between pornography and male violence. In the eighties and nineties, the anti-porn position found its strongest proponents in Michigan University law Professor Catherine MacKinnon and radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, whose crusade for censorship took inspiration from slogans like "pornography is the theory and rape is the practice". Dworkin, a former sex worker and political radical who had been sexually assaulted by policemen when she was in custody for protesting against the Vietnam War, believed that under patriarchy all acts of sex between men and women were violent sexual assaults no matter how pleasant it seemed. "Romance" she wrote in one of her books, "is rape embellished with meaningful looks", while dating was about the "rapist" bothering to "buy a bottle of wine".

The anti-censorship feminist position, whose politics this writer shares, initiated debates that profoundly shaped contemporary understanding of consent, women's sexual pleasure and the implications of using censorship as a strategy for social change. Anti-censorship feminists drew attention to the difference between sexist speech and sexually explicit speech and argued that by conflating sexual explicitness with sexism and misogyny, anti-porn feminists had failed to interrogate gender-based discrimination in 'respectable institutions' like religion, the family and the judiciary. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on 'harmful images' anti-porn feminists understand neither harm nor the complexity of images. Instead, by framing sexuality within a discourse of violence, they had encouraged sexphobia and victimology. Anti-censorship feminists repeatedly draw attention to the overwhelming data that fails to show causal links between pornography and violence, including the research that radical feminists quoted in their 'anti-porn campaigns'. For instance, anti-porn campaigners in the US, using as a basis the 1986 Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, state:

Should harsher penalties be leveled against persons who traffic in pornography? We do not believe so. Rather, it is our opinion that the most prudent course of action would be development of educational programmes that would teach viewers to be critical consumers of the media.

At this point, one might ask: Do media messages then have no impact on the viewer? If words and images left no impact, why would we make films, write articles or even present papers at conferences? Film and cultural studies on spectatorship continue to foreground the complexity of the relationship between the image and the viewer by emphasising large number of social and personal factors that shapes a person's responses to the media. Meaning is not produced exclusively by either the text or the viewer but is born at the intersection of both. Therefore, media has 'consequences' in that it does influence, inflect and mediate but it does so in ways that are unpredictable and non-determinate. In short, different people respond differently to the same text; the media does not have a predictable impact.

Spurious test

Despite the impressive scholarly work on the subject of spectatorship, common-place notions of media impact pervade the popular imagination. Representations of sex and violence, in particular, have raised the spectre of terrible 'effects' and demands for censorship. Pornographic images have historically been proscribed under obscenity laws. In India, the right to freedom of speech and expression is protected under Article 19 of the Constitution but the provisions of Article 19 (2) subject this fundamental right to 'reasonable restrictions'. The legal regulation of sexual speech primarily through the criminal law has been held to be such a 'reasonable restriction'.

Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, prohibits obscenity which it defines as any visual or written material that is 'lascivious or appeals to prurient interests' or which has the effect of depraving or corrupting persons exposed to it. Section 292 is based on the 1868 Hicklin Test which was approved and repeatedly applied by the Supreme Court of India. In the Regina Vs Hicklin case of 1868, the English courts provided a definition for criminally punishable obscenity by attempting to determine whether "the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall." The trouble with the test is obvious. It relies entirely on individual judgment and the interpreter's subjectivity. Since there is no consensus on the meaning of words like obscenity, vulgarity, prurience, lasciviousness and degradation, the interpretation of these words differ from individual to individual. What is obscene to one person may not be obscene to another. Consequently, the history of censorship is riven with endless confusion over the meaning of obscenity and its relationship to erotica and pornography.

Opponents of pornography often attempt to make a distinction between pornography (obscene, indecent and unacceptable) and erotica (artistic and acceptable) as though such a distinction was possible. There is a great deal of acuity in the witticism, "What I like is erotica and what you like is porn!" In a compelling historical mapping of this debate art historian Lynda Nead highlights the social legitimising function of erotic art ('the gold of high culture') and pornography ('the base matter'). This cultural distinction between the 'sublime' and the 'profane' creates clear distinctions in the cultural sphere between that which is considered to be 'coarse, vulgar and venal' and that which is 'pure, disinterested and sublimated'. Nead argues that those who are satisfied by purified pleasures are assured of social superiority because cultural consumption fulfils the function of legitimising social distinctions.

Something for everyone

The proliferation of cyber-porn metasites and the increasing circulation of porn on the mobile media bear evidence that porn is no longer a 'dirty little secret' but very much a part of mainstream culture. It is important to understand that like any other genre, porn caters to a range of spectators from the regular devotee to the occasional visitor. Likewise, it comprises a range of representations from the normative to the transgressive. Created by a range of sexual and media practitioners, porn today is not one but many things. In North America and Europe, the production of porn follows strict industry standards including certification of the age of the protagonist. These films find circulation through not just through sale and

distribution outlets but even film festivals, some of which are devoted entirely to pornography.

Like all genres, porn too has moved back and forth between other genres. Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo or 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) venture innovatively into the uncharted territory of sexual explicitness. More recently, films like Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy* (2001) have used 'live' instead of simulated sex. Those who still keel over backwards at the mention of porn, fail to grasp how expansive the terrain really is. Increasingly seen as a legitimate cultural practice and area of enquiry, pornography is gradually emerging as a discipline of study within the academy.

Just as religious discourse aims at spiritual upliftment, porn aims at erotic fulfilment. But porn has something to offer to even those who do not care about the 'realm of the senses' because like all cultural products, it provides insights into the lives of our times. As a genre, porn is poised upon a paradox. It explicitly and audaciously visibilises the hidden, dark secret that is sex. In so doing, it brings to light the contradictions of our sexual lives and longings. Looking at the diversity of material broadly referred to as 'Indian porn' can be revelatory not because of the extraordinariness of sexual explicitness but because of its overwhelming ordinariness. If the mainstream culture industry relentlessly stages the fair and slender socially desirable female body then porn stages its reverse. It renders visible sexually desirable bodies that militate against accepted notions of female beauty and sexual conformity. If the socially desirable body is one of restraint then the sexually desirable body, most commonly available in the sex and porn industry, is one of excess. It may shock to know that the body we desire socially may stand in sharp contrast to the body we desire sexually.

Pornography then is a phantasmatic arena. It does not reflect people's 'real' sex lives so much as it articulates the desires and aspirations for imagined ones. In so doing, it frequently militates against sexual conformity. It is for this reason that Savita Bhabi is both dead and alive.

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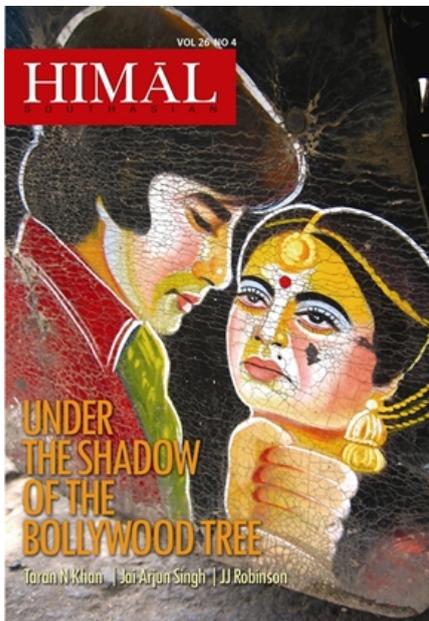
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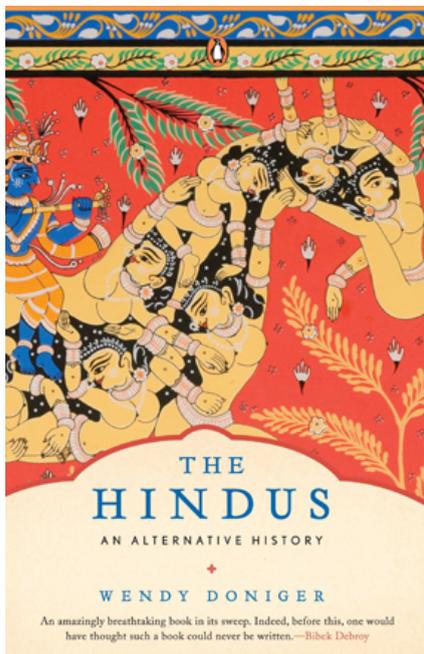


Image: Penguin India

Penguin India withdraws *The Hindus*

On 11 February 2014, Penguin India decided to recall and destroy all remaining copies of Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. The decision was part of an agreement between them and Shiksha Bachao Andolan, a Hindu campaign group that filed a case against the publishers in 2010, arguing that the book was insulting to Hindus and contained "heresies".

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