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GENDER, MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE IN A GLOBAL INDIA

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The context

Gender in contemporary Indian media and popular culture is a pervasive presence. There are three grounds upon which this visibility of gender rests: one is India’s new economic policy, two the Indian women’s movement, three the prominence and reach of media in contemporary India. The first two developments are historically distinct and apparently ideologically incommensurate. However, as are the curious ways of history, their paths have intersected and found myriad expressions in a proliferating and converging media. The unprecedented growth of the media and communication industry, our third context, owes as much to revolutionary technological innovations as to a political economy where communication, representation and publicity increasingly define contemporary public culture (Chaudhuri 2010b). A consequence of this intersection is the hyper-visibility of gender in a loquacious and an intensely mediated popular culture. A brief elaboration of the three contexts within which this chapter rests is therefore in order.

India’s new economic policy towards greater integration into global capitalism was formally initiated in 1991. This marked a radical break from a long period of state-initiated development based on import substitution and a focus on equity rather than growth. Until then the spirit of austerity was seen as a virtue that drew moral sanction from Gandhi’s lasting impact on Indian nationalism. This was to change quickly and dramatically over the next two decades. The media played a decisive role in making profligacy socially legitimate and even a “national” duty (Chaudhuri 1998). In this entire process of recasting the “nation” the constituent elements of Indian nationalism were reconfigured, as choice rather than constraint and extravagance rather than thrift became the new rhetoric of globalization. What did not change from an earlier period is the deployment of gender as a key icon of public discourse.

Public discourses on gender since liberalization have been shaped in significant ways by the second phase of the Indian women’s movement (since the 1970s). In earlier decades, one of the central issues that the movement addressed was the cognitive invisibility of gender. The emergence of women’s studies, its expansion and steady institutionalization over the next three decades in India has to be located in this context. The 1980s saw the beginning of academic institutionalization of women’s studies in colleges and universities on one hand, in the developmental sector on the other and in good measure within the media. Issues such as dowry,
rape and legal rights raised by the women's movement were also increasingly covered in the media and debated in public discourses from the 1970s into the 1980s. From the 1990s we discern a shift. Gender becomes even more visible now but the tenor has shifted, though it is by no means unidirectional. The issues raised by the women's movement do not recede entirely. What happens is that in the increasing glossy features and advertisements, collective ideas of women's liberation and freedom become reconfigured as essentially individual desires and goals, which the new opportunities that the growing market offered could gratify. Instances of backlash to feminism exist, but this is by no means a visible presence in the media (Chaudhuri 2000). Feminism and gender, albeit redefined, enters the lexicon of public discourse and is deployed widely by the state, civil society and the market. In the media it becomes a preferred choice to anchor its stories and images, to represent both itself and the "global nation."

The third ground for the pervasive presence of gender is the logic of a culture in which self-representation, image construction, brand building and communication are extremely important. This process is aided by the old and new media, which are also the central sites for the making and dissemination of dominant ideology. In such a culture what matters is how you appear and present yourself, whether as an individual, as a company, as a political party or as Brand India. In the initial years after liberalization, the rapidly growing advertisement industry's influence on the media was the driving force in publicizing the new rhetoric of globalization (Chaudhuri 2001). In more recent years the media and the public relations industry have become critical not just for corporate institutions but also for political parties, the government and social movements. Publicity about Brand India was important for global investment as well as for its own citizenry. Both the nation and its people were to be recast economically and culturally. The industrialization of representation and communication that began with the modern era has acquired an unprecedented scale, convergence and speed in contemporary India. Speed is critical for effective communication today. Therefore, catchy phrases, smart sound bites, powerful visuals, sexual images, hidden cameras, sting operations and incessant exposure are indispensable for communication. An idea of discursive persuasion, once deemed appropriate to the public culture of a modern liberal democracy, is simply too time consuming to be effective. Gender and sexuality as a basic category of identity forms an extremely condensed but effective mode of communication in such a circumstance.

The argument

My central argument in this chapter is that any discussion of gender, media and culture in contemporary India needs to recognize these three contexts which I have outlined: the constitutive influence of three decades of institutionalized feminism; the imperatives of neo-liberal economic policies; and the scale of the media and communication industry in the making of popular and public culture. I argue further that this constitutive influence has been largely made possible through knowledge produced by a new set of firms specialized in market research and communication which are interested in understanding the Indian market. I draw upon analysis of major firms like Ogilvy and Mather, Mudra, Erickson and TMRC. These firms function across the media industry, developmental, advertisement and management sectors. They reflect the changed nature of the media industry — a proliferating site of media and communication studies. Thus, the firms are linked not just with each other but also with academia (Chaudhuri 2010a). The thick-and-fast flow of images and ideas on gender, which I focus upon in this chapter, has therefore to be understood not as free-floating and self-propelled — an unintended consequence of new technologies in a globalized world — but as products of these agencies. For instance, as we will see, marketing agencies take cognizance of the impact of
feminist ideas of “freedom” and “autonomy” on the new Indian woman consumer and further reconstruct these ideas in alignment with neo-liberal ideas of self-realization through achievement and pleasure. In my argument, I draw on a conception of neo-liberalism as a radicalized form of capitalism based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention characterized by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realization, that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible.

(Hilgers 2011: 351)

I also focus on the significant influence of the West – undeniably in the corporate world of media and advertisement but also in academia. While there is a new focus on India in the Western academia, including a new attempt to provincialize the West, the influence of theoretical paradigms generated in the West is paradoxically more insidious in sectors of Indian academia. While I cannot develop this point at any length here, I would like to buttress my argument by drawing upon a recent survey of decadal trends in Indian sociology and social anthropology in the past decade and an observation by the editors of one of the foremost sociology journals in India. When I seek to draw attention to this new phase of Western influence, my effort is to show, first, the altered yet powerful nature of this influence, and second, a certain convergence of ideas between market strategy and academic theory. Postmodern theory, and its deference to recognizing diversity and “other cultures,” has been influential in many humanities departments within Indian academia since the 1990s. Significantly it is during the same time that we have had an increasing deployment of “local” cultures in advertisement of products by Western companies such as Coca-Cola or Pepsi-Cola or, for that matter, McDonald’s with its pure vegetarian burgers. I develop this argument later through a discussion of post-feminism and the growing market for chick-lit fiction in India. Post-feminism has been variously defined and is a contested term veering between signaling an epistemological break with second-wave feminism, a historical shift and a regressive stance. I prefer to use it in the mode that appears to be popular in Indian media – understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of several interrelated themes such as an emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment, subjective desires and resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference. Chick-lit was defined as a “genre that went beyond female as to include the breadth of female experiences including love, courtship and gender” (Wikipedia, accessed December 7, 2012). While Western audiences today are more familiar than ever before with the Indian culture industry (for example, with Bollywood, Indian fashion, music and cuisine), I still hold that in the broader institutional and ideological apparatus – through which this familiarity is produced and transmitted – gender, sexuality, cultural diversity and race are usually configured as elements in the business of consumption in a global market. The questions I pose therefore are the following: How does the idea of feminism get redefined in neo-liberal times? How does gender travel? How do we look at the hyper-visibility of gender from a critical feminist perspective?

Media, gender and market research

A dominant view of popular culture in a globalized world is that of a free-flow movement of images and ideas, arbitrary and hybrid fusing rhizome-like in unexpected fashions (Probyn 1998: 155–173). My argument is that this flow is neither free flowing nor arbitrary. New and old ideas of gender are researched and deliberated upon, before they are deployed by the wide network of
communication and market research agencies that form part of post-liberalized India's popular culture. Gender became very visible, but perhaps in ways not anticipated by the women's movement of the 1970s when it raised the question of physical invisibility of women in the public sphere and cognitive invisibility in extant conceptual frames. What strikes one most about these marketing and communication agencies is the refreshing straightforwardness and candor with which they explain the reason for using gender so extensively in marketing. I begin with an analysis of the nature and purpose of research by marketing agencies.

A paper commissioned by Mudra, one of the biggest advertising firms “to delve into the practices of the urban youth to give insights to the Marketer,” observes that gender has been a major focus of investigation by market research and “has been widely used in brand communications to achieve better segmentation and targeting of consumers” (Jetley 1998). Further, the paper spells out the reasons why market research found it effective to simultaneously use from both the “domain of feminism” and “gender stereotypes.”

The domain of marketing communications not only deals with effectively connecting the brand with its consumers but is also responsible in reflecting and shaping the perceptions of the consumers at large. In this thesis, I’ve attempted to see how we can harness the psychological as well as the social play in urban India in the domain of feminism and chauvinism – by studying the perceptions of urban consumers, particularly youth, as well as by analyzing the media’s role in this regard. . . . The goal is to provide the marketers with updated literature, which may help the brands understand the perceptions of its consumers better. . . . It is not unethical for the media to reflect any stereotype that exists in the society. However, portrayal of certain stereotypes, which are regressive for any gender, can be avoided.

(Chaudhuri 2009, emphasis added)

Such adroit use of “feminism and chauvinism,” with a very specific purpose to shape the perceptions of consumers, is very far removed from the 1970s when as Indian feminists argued, the media used stereotypical projections of women in the media. This stereotypical approach was criticized by Indian feminists, since it had not taken “into consideration the other realities of a woman’s life” and had not considered the validity of “a woman’s way of thinking, expressing and feeling” (Rao 2001). Consumer research has been responsive to this critique as the comments of a consumer insight director, McCann Erickson, suggests:

Advertisers and market researchers tend to look at consumption patterns and accordingly straitjacket women as traditionalists or hedonists or sophisticates. They’re missing the basic point. “Women are human beings first, then consumers, you must know how they think, feel, respond and react in real life situations.”

(McCann Erickson 2000)

Responding to the need to know more about women’s sensibilities, Ogilvy and Mather, the US$8.8 billion advertising agency, conducted a comprehensive study of Asian mothers spread across 12 markets. According to this study, there are perhaps eight acceptable portrayals that could strike a chord with women:

1. organized, resourceful homebody;
2. willing acceptor of help so long as it doesn’t seem like she is neglecting her duties;
3. a successful woman, not necessarily a powerful one;
Notwithstanding the fact that both feminists and consumer analysts seek to recognize the validity of women’s way of thinking and feeling, the dilemma remains as to how and where one draws a line between discriminating stereotypes and authentic subjective desires of women. The matter becomes further compounded because:

*often feminist arguments that analyze this internal conflict are appropriated by market forces to create messages that successfully establish recognition and identity between the text and the receiver.*

The consumer insight team of McCann Erickson came up with a profile of new-age Indian women after a series of focus group discussions with a cross section of urban middle class women. In an assessment of the felt need of these women, in what they call the “wish list”, the market research team highlights “the strange but easy coexistence of traditional values and a modern outlook evident in the urban Indian woman.”

*(Rao 2001: 5)*

These firms have been able to capture the complex mix of ideas, which form part of the lived reality of middle-class Indians. Chauvinism and feminism may thus both be deployed. Relatively new ideas of the metro-sexual and recognition of female sexuality can be appropriated, to target new social segments. The Axe Body Spray advertisements have made popular sexually charged images. I draw here on two examples. One is an image of a chocolate man literally being “eaten” by a woman, the other of a formally dressed man in an office similarly “attacked” by women in various states of undress. Both of these examples are overt expressions of women’s sexuality, a taboo subject for much of modern India’s history. Feminist writings on colonial India have specially addressed the imposition of Victorian mores, the nineteenth-century Indian middle-class aspirations to fashion a normative model of domesticated and sexually sanitized women and the reinvention of the purported traditional virtuous Hindu woman (Sangari and Vaid 1990; Chaudhuri 1993). The latter has been a continuous though muted strand in modern Indian ideological thought, which acquired a re-energized stridency with the rise of Hindutva since the 1990s. Not surprisingly, the Axe advert drew expected disapproval from right-wing Hindu groups, which in turn evoked responses in a mock vein of such moral policing:

Ever since they started allowing kissing in Bollywood movies, boy, India’s morality is going straight to hell. The cow-filled conservative nation is seeing its Victorian standards of sexuality crumble in the face of racy foreign advertising. The prime offender? You guessed it: Axe Body Spray. Of course. The Indian government recently banned Axe’s infamous “Chocolate Man” ad, which it sees as a symptom of cultural decline, along with all the new sexy billboards popping up across the country.

*(http://gawker.com/5047155/axe-body-spray-ads-destroy-indian-culture)*

My central concern here is, however, not the varied ideological responses to the advertisement. My point is to call attention to the informed deliberations that go into the making of advertisements. TMRC, “an innovative consumer intelligence company operating across Asia”
with a “team of experienced specialists” who “possess keen minds and the professional skills required for gaining a deep and comprehensive understanding of consumer experiences, their deep psychologies, their perceptions, and motivations”, knowledge of “what actually drives consumer behavior,” writes:

Axe has always used the basic insight – in fact, the very basic animal instinct – of the male species’ attraction towards the opposite sex to position and sell the brand. And quite successfully. They have never been shy of stating their “get laid” message in most explicit insinuation in their advertising campaigns. India is an important emerging market for male deodorants, and a number of new players are trying to copy Axe’s positioning by jumping on the “get the girls” bandwagon.

(http://www.tmrresearch.com/, emphasis added)

Such uses of sexuality and gender are new in Indian media which one could argue are at once reflecting new mores and actively reshaping them.

The broader point I seek to make through this exposition is the industrial scale of regular monitoring, research and analysis that goes on in the convergent industry of media, communications, public relations and advertising to make possible the idea of the self-responsible individual. Consider the following example of a story in a skin-lightening advertisement. The following quote is one of the many stories in advertisements available on the web, more often than not presented simply as a free-floating piece of objective “reporting.”

A Facebook application that pales the skin of darker men has been launched. The Vaseline app is targeting India’s fast-growing “metrosexual” marketplace. In India, a multibillion-pound industry provides creams to lighten complexions. The campaign is fronted by Bollywood actor Shahid Kapur. . . . “The response has been pretty phenomenal.”

(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1294649/Facebook-app-Indian-men-users-look-paler-ace.html#ixzz1vxr0Vdnn, emphasis added)

This is one of many examples in the media of individuals who are depicted as completely free to make her or his choice – to lighten their skin tone or go for a nose job. We need to take note of the fact that such advertisements do not operate in isolation but in tandem with a surfeit of sponsored features, news, editorials, interviews of professionals such as doctors, beauty specialists, hair-stylists, sports icons, CEOs, etc. to promote new ideas of “self-realization,” aspirations, achievement and pleasure. An example that I draw here is from an article entitled “Like Daughters, like Mothers” which begins with the caption, “With the anti-ageing fad kicked off, mothers and daughters can pass off as sisters.” Ruchika Mehta writes:

India is definitely well on its way to a youth obsessed society. It’s now common to see mothers and daughters sharing outfits and make up, going to the same gyms, following the same fad diet, shopping at the same places, hanging off at the same bars. Like daughters, moms too are doing their girlie, oops ladies’, nights outs, a catalyst, catering to all their needs. Anti-ageing capsules and creams, anti-cellulite oils, diet supplements, spas and rejuvenation centres, health foods, are easily available. Mothers with all their diets, gyms, YSL concealers, personal trainers, yoga classes, Ayurvedic skin care, and plastic surgeons, look years younger. While the daughters, with early maturing, loads of make up, and a hard party life, look much older.

(Mehta 2004)
Thus far I have discussed the role that market and communication research agencies play in mapping new and old gender constructions with the clear and evident purpose to effectively seize on what the potential customer desires. A related but significant point that also needs to be taken into consideration is that the media industry itself is a major site for communication research. Like the marketing agencies discussed earlier, the media industry too is acutely self-consciousness of the changes that it is amidst – its role in shaping public discourse, in advertising what sponsors seek to advertise and the competitive need to advertise and promote itself. The boundaries between these roles are increasingly blurred.

My discussion reveals that we need to also take careful cognizance of the change since the early 1990s when India witnessed rapid growth of the advertisement industry. What was novel in advertisements 20 years ago has become commonplace and routine, part of the landscape of popular culture. A rich corpus of “studies” generated by the advertising agencies on advertisements exists. Discussions on new gender norms and its cross-cultural variations are carried on within the industry on questions such as whether “male and female roles in Indian ads have changed over the past decade.” Referring to a study published in the November 2000 issue of Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, Chatterjee mentions that some of the common stereotypical portrayals are less prevalent in Indian ads than in British magazine ads.

Indian ads are being presented in a much more macho-dominant manner than they were before. . . . On the other hand, while sports and athletics sported more men than women in the past in India and in the West, today . . . you may see a cricketer like Mahendra Dhoni as often as you see Mirza. . . . Women in Indian ads are being presented in less dependent roles than they were before. An ad for a leading women’s fortnightly recently carried a delightful image of an ageing woman in bridal attire. It later transpires that her daughter is getting her married again! This is an example of positive advertising that subtly carries a social message. Many mother-daughter ads in recent times bear out female bonding, in effect, subtly marginalising the role of men.

(Chatterjee 2006, emphasis added)

The body of research and analysis that goes on within the media and communication industry should make us wary of any blanket claim that the audience and customer are “self-responsible” subjects who are not passive victims of ideology. The discussion thus far suggests a far more complex working of how dominant ideas are constructed, not in gross opposition to what subjects feel but informed and sensitive of it. The contention that they therefore are no “passive victims, but resistant actors” needs more careful attention (Chaudhuri 2005).

My engagement with the functioning of communication and marketing research is also to dispel a very widespread claim in globalization and culture studies about free-floating images and ideas. Consumer research, as we saw, seeks to project this very message of “self-propelled” individuals and freedom. They do so after studying the potential consumer at great length, scale and sophistication to target consumers with “what they freely” choose and desire. Having identified the agencies that are central in the business of gender and media communication, I move on in the next section to an analysis of some recurring gendered ideological motifs that the contemporary Indian media and popular culture appear to promote, namely an ideology of self-realization. This I argue is done at two levels: self as enterprise which one can build up; and a cult of self-expression. If the first finds its way in stories of women bosses, the latter is in the growing visibility of sexuality in the media and popular culture.
Over-communicative abundance, contesting ideas and the making of a new selfhood

The aim in this section is twofold: to capture the pervasive sense of over-communicative abundance; and to focus albeit in a limited fashion on an ongoing new construction of selfhood which draws elements from disparate ideological sources. It is by addressing two central motifs which define selfhood that I seek to capture the effortless ease with which disparate ideologies such as post-feminism and neo-liberalism coalesce in the construction of a selfhood that celebrates self-enterprise, pleasure and sexuality, and posits them as women’s empowerment. The idea of self-enterprise as central to selfhood is of course not delinked from the idea of pleasure as self-realization. It is important, however, to distinguish between two related but different ideological strands in neo-liberalism in contemporary India: one strand more closely tied with the visible and hegemonic presence of the corporate world in public life manifest in stories on women bosses; the other with the salience of consumption and hedonist pleasure in the media and popular culture apparent in the hyper-visibility of sexuality in the public sphere. Significantly both are seen as markers of women’s empowerment and therefore most visible during the yearly celebration of International Women’s Day.

I started with a notion that the idea of self as enterprise may have emerged from neo-liberal ideas while the idea of pleasure as self-realization may have been influenced by post-feminism. One cannot push the point of sources too far. What, however, one can affirm with far greater certainty is that there is considerable overlap which is in the spirit of contemporary India. We have already seen the considerable acumen of market research in deliberately and selectively drawing from those feminist ideas that appear most conducive to neo-liberal reconstruction (Chaudhuri 2010c). Earlier in the chapter I referred to the neo-liberal idea of extreme emphasis on an individuated selfhood, flexibility, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realization that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible. An analysis of the rhetoric of globalization in India, however, suggests that projection of the “unfettered” self in the immediate decade following liberalization was equally a projection of economic liberalization, the concerned social context that made this “freedom” possible, a freedom once unimaginable in the Nehruvian epoch of license raj and state control (Chaudhuri 2001). Celebration of this new-found “self” of Indian women was therefore a simultaneous celebration of India’s economic reforms. In recent years, however, we witness the celebration of the new selfhood, rather than celebration of reforms.

As mentioned before, there are two aspects of this “new individuated selfhood” that appear to recur in the media: the joyous celebration of sexuality, evident in films, advertisements, fiction and popular culture at large; and laudatory accounts of success evident in stories about women achievers such as corporate bosses. In both images the unstated and sometimes stated assumption is that women are now free to both achieve and enjoy. Keeping the convergence of the distinct contexts, it is therefore not surprising that ideas informing marketing strategies and post-feminist ideas of selfhood articulated within the academia merge seamlessly. It is in this context that one begins with an abstract on post-feminism for a conference by a department of English in India. It reads:

Post feminism is a new form of empowerment and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, fashion, hybridism and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism. Post feminism might be seen as critique of “second wave” feminism, as being, for example, too white and middle class. Some post feminists use the term “third wave” to avoid the usage of “post”, which could be taken to imply
“anti-feminism”. *Media discourses play a crucial role in the representation, evaluation and development of this new feminism.*

(Taghizadeh 2011, emphasis added)

It is of some significance that the above abstract makes special mention of the crucial role that the media plays in the “development of this new feminism.” My own survey of the English media also suggests that it has widely covered both the emergence of post-feminism as well as the new genre of chick-lit described as the latest and most irreverent entrant into the world of English-language fiction. Publishers and critics alike have heralded it as a reflection of the growing confidence among women in the cities.

*She is single, has a career and is willing to have fun, take risks and find a man her way, and not necessarily her family’s way.* It is a woman we have only read about in books from the Western countries and now, suddenly we are finding her on Indian roads…

A generation ago, marriage was the only route to independence from parental control in India. Now women are working, living alone in the cities, hanging out with women friends, drinking, dating and having fun in spite of the enormous social pressure to get married.

(Lakshmi 2007)

This laudatory account by no means goes unchallenged, but it does not occupy the kind of center space that the former does. If congratulatory pieces on chick-lit as post-feminism occupy front pages in major newspapers, critical comments by feminists such as the one below would be restricted to blogs or at the most sound bites in the electronic media.

[I]f you are a woman you have to walk a certain way at a certain hour. If you begin transgressing, you are marked and your vulnerability increases manifold. I have tried and I know it is so difficult to be oblivious of the space one inhabits or perambulates. To proclaim that it is neutral is to ignore reality.

(Subramaniam 2007)

If post-feminism sits at one end of this burgeoning discourse, overt anti-feminism too vies for space in this communicative clutter that marks popular culture. As in the case of the abstract on post-feminism, the media here too find mention, once again indicating the hegemonic space that it has come to occupy in recent times.

It is a common perception [*through the media hype about women’s torture and anti-patriarchal propaganda*] that only men are the torturer and women are victims…The legal torture of men is not an issue of physical strength or abusive behavior of one party, it is an issue of a legal system… Such a nazist legal system created by feminist groups is making feminism synonymous to Nazism in India… The *feminazis* in India is well recognized by International media and other countries and is disgust to the national pride. US Travel Department has already issued warning to its citizens against marrying Indian women.

(http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1139.html)

Such blatant attacks on women in general and feminism in particular are a visible presence in contemporary Indian popular culture, though it does not share the legitimacy that feminism or
neo-liberalism does within the public discourse. Yet on many occasions we see such sentiments in statements made by important public personnel.\(^4\)

Sexuality is certainly out in the open, though the intention with which different agencies seek to sponsor this hyper-visibility may be quite different. For instance, in the thick traffic of ideas that mark the contemporary culture of communicative abundance the advertiser, the feminist and the public health activist may intertwine unexpectedly in making sexuality visible in discourse. Thus as I surfed the Web I found a write-up on the construction of masculinities by researchers associated with the Population Council in the Journal of Family Welfare which begins a discussion on the role gender perspectives have had in the study of Indian masculinities so necessary for the “health and well-being of women” (Verma and Mahendra 2004: 71). A click of a mouse later I found an advertisement on vagina bleaching.

Do your ladyparts need some sprucing up? Like, color-wise? Wait, what? We’re sooo confused. But a new ad for an Indian skin lightening product called Clean and Dry Intimate Wash, spotted by Jezebel seems to answer that question with a big fat “DUH.” In the commercial, a couple lounges in their house, the man idly reading a newspaper while the woman pouts to herself because, clearly, he’s ignoring her due to her dark-colored privates. Luckily, she gets ahold of Clean and Dry, which makes her vulva a few shades lighter, and her husband is happy-go-lucky again. Whew! Divorce averted.


There is a pervasive focus on sexuality evident from even cursory surfing of the Web, and on television, in films and radio programs, on billboards and the relentless text messages on cell phones. In this regard I would like to draw from two recent requests I received from journalists whom I have never met or known for my comments on “acceptance of sexual humor” and women with “facial hair” respectively. I quote from both, since they reveal what issues young journalists are encouraged to work on, and the kinds of issues an academic working in gender issues is expected to be familiar with.

I am working on an article on the increasing acceptance of sexual and toilet humour as part of modern Indian pop culture. Merchandise with kinky themes and toilet humour has suddenly become popular in India: ... illustrations with references to sex are becoming increasingly commonplace. These brands are all homegrown and they don’t seek to titillate so much as to poke fun at sexuality. ... What does this tell about Indian society? Is this sexual playfulness a marker for sexual openness and coming-of-age?

(personal communication, June 2012, emphasis added)

I am a Delhi based journalist presently working on an article that discusses how facial/body hair is still a hurdle for women to get accepted or termed beautiful in our society. Studies say women are rated as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women. We do see the effect of this mind set in metros, where women are already slave to various depilatory practices, but now even small town and rural India is hooked.

Also as Breanne Fahs, an associate professor of women and gender studies at Arizona State University, in an article titled Dreaded “Otherness”: Heteronormative Patrolling in Women’s Body Hair, says depilation affects women’s attitudes towards themselves giving rise to “body disgust”.

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Such approaches by journalists from the media are routine, since I too am just a click away, like the sites I surveyed here for this chapter. These requests obviously emerge from the kinds of demands and expectations with which the media industry operates. Stories on the body and sexuality are therefore important. I find the last communication significant not just for its attention on the body and on sexual desirability but also for the telling reference to the American professor of women and gender studies which of course takes me back to my point about the persisting Western influence whether in Indian academia as in this case or the advertising sector whose links of course are more direct.

If overt flaunting of one’s sexuality is one element in the construction of the new individuated selfhood, the other element is an ideology of self as enterprise, manifest in the surge of stories on women achievers and women bosses. If sexual expression forms one end of self-expression the other end is achievement: the ideology of self as enterprise. If academia and various Western feminisms are one source of influence, Western corporate research is another. The body of market research, which we discussed at some length earlier, quite clearly draws on both, apart from finding out more about the “real feelings” of the Indian man and woman. In other words, a concerted attempt exists to promote neo-liberal practices and representations, which are produced and disseminated on the global scale. I have earlier referred to this drive towards the self as enterprise as a major principle of the neo-liberal art of governing. The corporate world with its hegemonic presence in the media has to be recognized today as a central site of ideological production and dissemination of neo-liberal culture. An example is the McKinsey Quarterly, which anyone can subscribe to online and which carries features such as “Moving Women to the Top.” In this example, a survey shows that a majority of executives believe gender diversity in leadership is linked to better financial performance, but companies take few actions to support women in the workforce (Prabhudesai 2009). Within the dominant celebratory rhetoric of India’s growth story, the theme of women bosses is important. We have seen a series of pieces on this in the recent past.

About a decade back, this discussion about women bosses in the Indian workforce may have been irrelevant. Today, India Inc. has woken up to a surreal surge of women executives taking reigns of companies, departments and organizations and are slowly clawing back on the apparent gender gap that has been the buzz for many years. Let’s take a look at what some of the ladies in the top brass had to say when ET quizzed them about the secret to their climb up the corporate ladder.

(Kaushambi 2012, emphasis added)

The expanding sports business in India too has been marked by the rise of women bosses, a development widely reported in the media.

In a male-dominated sportsworld, some females have outshone their male counterparts. MSN India takes a look at some of the top female bosses who’ve broken the glass ceiling in sports . . . Gayatri Reddy is the face of the Deccan Chargers. 
These examples reflect one more dimension in the wider cultural milieu marked by images of abundance, talk of information overload and cornucopias of communication (Keane 1999) that I have been analyzing. This is also a milieu where ideas from the West flow with greater ease, whether within academia or the marketing agencies or the social sector. Finally this is a milieu wherein individuality, gender, sexuality, empowerment, cultural diversity and race are configured as elements in the business of consumption in a global market.

Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to plot the hyper-visibility of women in the media and contemporary Indian popular culture against three contexts: the women’s movement; India’s economic reforms; and the unprecedented reach of an over-communicative and importantly largely audio-visual, often interactive media. In such a context marked by institutionalized feminism, neo-liberal ideology and the logic of a publicity driven culture, the lines between the real and the reel blur. A surfeit of images and information appear to float freely and randomly as they relentlessly make their presence felt through 24/7 radio and television, internet and cell phone. It is this idea of a fusion of free-floating images buttressed by certain theoretical perspectives that this chapter has sought to question. My argument is to see them as intended consequences of the myriad professional organizations of market, media and communication research that today are central sites of ideological production and dissemination of global capitalism. I do not for a moment doubt that many of these efforts have been democratizing, opening up spaces for self-expression that has for too long been forbidden. I would also argue that contemporary media and popular culture offer “potential access,” a “promise to entry for other social segments” to the post-liberalized middle class (Fernandes 2011: 71). I do not posit this communicative abundance, but only make a point about inequality and access – that there are more mobile phones than toilets in India (Vishnu 2012). My questions are simply: “What could be the possible impact of post-feminism jostling alongside anti-feminism on democratic politics, other than catering to potential market segments”? “Does the ‘liberating individual creativity’ empower the market to tame emancipatory politics?” (Fraser 2009: 108). Perhaps Marcuse’s observations are not so out of date.

All points of view can be heard: the Communist and the Fascist, the Left and the Right, the white and the Negro, the crusaders for armament and for disarmament. Moreover, in endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood.

(cited in Wolff et al. 1969: 108)

But must we be so pessimistic or should we concur with the view that “feminist analysis offers the fundamental epistemological tools necessary to understanding ICTs, as it does to all fields of enquiry” notwithstanding the communicative abundance? Perhaps it does make sense to understand “the global digital technological architecture and advanced capitalism” as “the warp and weft of the social fabric through which our subject positions are shaped; yet it is in the new spatiality and mobility of the digital realm that the possibility of egalitarian change lies” (Gurumurthy 2011: 144).
Gender, media, culture in India

Notes

1 There are in all 622 TV channels either already operating or planning to commence operations in India. The growth in print media has been no less remarkable (Jeffrey 2000; Ninan 2007). The two most widely read Hindi newspapers, Dainik Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar, together recorded a total of 89.8 million readers in 2008, while the most read English daily, The Times of India, had 13.3 million readers (www.Scotmag.com, January 2009). The number of internet users in India — currently estimated at around 140 million — exceeds the number of TV sets in our homes. Facebook, with its 44 million Indian members, reaches more of us than any single TV channel, Doordarshan included, while YouTube, with over 31 million Indian viewers a month, is far and away our largest English television channel. Meanwhile Twitter and Google Plus each get to about 14 million of us in a month — a number that is twice the circulation of India’s largest newspaper (Murthy 2012).

2 Significantly, at the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Contributions to Indian Sociology (CIS) a real fear was expressed that non-resident Indians (NRIs) or foreigners writing about India will soon outpace the number of Indians researching themselves (Baviskar et al. 2008: 4). See also Chaudhuri and Jaichandra (forthcoming).

3 The proprietor of Times of India (TOI) recently described his company Bennett and Coleman, which publishes TOI, as an advertising company. Siddharth Varadjan, editor of The Hindu, an English-language newspaper published continuously since 1878, in a discussion on media functioning in the program Left, Right and Centre hosted by NDTV, broadcast on October 24, 2012.

4 The horrific case of the young woman, named Nirbhaya, or fearless, by the media, who died after being brutally raped and beaten in a moving bus in December 2012 in New Delhi, has elicited responses ranging from child marriage to banning skirts for schoolgirls. This in part appears as a backlash to visible sexuality in the media, a point that needs careful engagement rather than a cross-fire between misogynist attacks on women’s sexuality and a celebration of sexuality in a society deeply marked not just by gender inequality but by gross class and caste inequality.


5 The rush of middle-class and lower-middle-class parents to push their children into the mushrooming reality shows across channels is indicative.

Bibliography


**Websites**

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1294649/Facebook-app-Indian-men-users-look-paler-face.html#ixzz1vxf0Vdmn